



want you to check me out. Get to know me in my absence so that you'll learn everything you need to know about what I l

butch/femme

INSIDE LESBIAN GENDER

editor: **SALLY R. MUNT**

photo editor: CHERRY SMYTH

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and the other

butch/femme

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CASSELL

London and Washington

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I would like to dedicate the book to two very different people who in incomparable ways have shown me the joy and complexity of being a butch: first, Joan Nestle's work, to me and many others, has embodied the precious desirability of butch/femme, and has been incalculably valuable in affirming lesbian gender differences. Her work has been a gift to the lesbian community. Second, I would like to dedicate this book to my Dad, whose working-class masculinity has been a role model to me in ways too manifold to be listed. He has shown me many things by example, including how to respect women, dress up for a date, drive my own car, and tie my own ties.

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Introduction

SALLY R. MUNT

This volume developed out of my own frustration with the apparent lack of critical work on butch/femme emanating from Lesbian and Gay Studies or Queer Theory. Despite the fact that many of us live our lives *as though* butch or femme were expressive identities, prevalent selective intellectual trends can encourage us in the view that these are to be interpreted as provisional, empty, and artificial. This book is an attempt to think creatively about butch/femme in a way which honours the intimacy of these designations, hoping to articulate the closeness we hold to these categories, respecting the evocative power they hold in lesbian cultures, but also avoiding the clichéd romanticism often endemic to their representation. Thinking so locally – so personally – prevents us from disassociating ourselves from theories which abstract our experience. It counsels us that the rhetorics of fragmentation do not need to come down to our lives being lived as so much circling space-dust: we can have – and do have – models of habitation which respect the somatic and affective integrity of our existence. Butch/femme is one of those models; to theorize butch/femme is to interiorize it, embody it, move within it and let it move us. Butch/femme knits together desire, turning and twisting its strands into social formations. When Joan Nestle wrote *A Restricted Country* in 1988, she protested that 'it is the body that has been most often cheated out of its own historical language',¹ and her book starts with a section called 'I am'. *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender* echoes, and therefore emulates, that move. The working title for this collection was *Butch/Femme: Theorizing Lesbian Gender*. Half-way through the book's germination I changed it to the present nomination. As Ann Cvetkovich points out, 'If butch/femme is theory made flesh, then we must also attend to the ways in which the flesh transforms the theory'. 'Theory' seemed to de-materialize, disembodiment and abstract intellectual work from the bodies, the selves which have produced it. 'Theory' brings too often a procedure of relocation, a distantiation which carries a false hope of impartiality. I modified the title because I wanted it to carry the intimation of investment – the intimacy – that butch and femme sensibilities hold for us, as Biddy Martin puts it, 'the enfolding of an outside that [has] become embodied'.²

Butch/femme is often understood as a gender characteristic which is superimposed onto the female body; in an epistemological mode it is deployed as a style of knowing, interpreting, and doing lesbian gender. Butch/femme is also mustered in an ontological framework, where it is concerned with being, with having an identity, and a kind of true self. The organization of butch/femme according to these two modes – epistemological and ontological – is aggressively disputed (with femmes often advancing the former, and butches defending the latter). Personally I feel caught somewhere between the two: I was always a tomboy, but this didn't stop me knowing I was born female. History is often deployed as a narrativized explanation of our adult sexualities (although examples of 'I was a butch child' are rarely so elegant as Elissa Perry's story of adolescent

negotiation). In thinking about this Introduction I went back to my own old photographs to look for incipient clues. Did I intentionally drop the gold lamé handbag out of the picture of me at three years old in my new cardigan? Riding the carousel with my father at Butlins Holiday Camp in Skegness – perhaps *here* I can imagine my butch self emerging (although in the background is the 'Lasses' toilets, a juxtaposition to which I shall return). These two photos could be offered as retrospective evidence of butchness; there is no doubt, though, that I was a girl. My mother always used to tell me how much she longed for a girl, a desire which always provoked my discomfort. I sometimes think I became a butch both to spite her, and to woo her. There are complicated motivations at work here. With an ambivalence both to masculinity and femininity I entered my thirties, and found a gender I could live in, and it found me. I've learned that this is the way I want to love women, but it is not without shame.

Butch/femme can enable saying what we want without necessarily speaking. Still, butch/femme has been conceptualized as a form of speech, and a mode of movement,



as a way of taking up space in a queer way. Less often the conversation is shifted onto erotic ground, where butch/femme concerns desire, about loving, wanting, and having sex, about creating sex, about communicating how to be sexual. Butch/femme produces a way of looking and being looked at; it is visual, tactile, and oral, it is a scent, maybe even a taste, and it is about being open to listen, to recognize and receive. Butch/femme is lesbian gender experienced from the inside, it is a mode of articulation *and* a living movement, it is the way our bodies speak our desires. In short, butch/femme is a way we can inhabit lesbian desire, a *habitus*. Habitus, which is French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's formulation, is the practice of everyday life, particularly as it is found in the body. For Bourdieu the body is a kind of mnemonic device upon which culture is habitually inscribed. So, in Bourdieu's

habitus, the body re-enacts its placement in space, according to social taxonomies such as gender and sexuality. These social frameworks prescribe what can, and cannot be said, foreclosing the unutterable by repudiation. But these parameters are never completely coherent; let us enquire, then, with Judith Butler:

How is it that the apparently injurious effects of discourse become the painful resources by which a resignifying practice is wrought? Here it is not only a question of how discourse injures bodies, but how certain injuries establish certain bodies at the limits of available ontologies, available schemes of intelligibility. And further, how is it that the abjected come to make their own claim through and against the discourses that have sought their repudiation?³

Butch/femme bodies are forged out of the violence of speech; thus, we continue to be spoken as injured subjects. Unbearably poignant as this all too often is, the paradox of resistance arouses our imagination, animates our intelligence, and mobilizes our bodies to innovate this injustice, inspire it with insurgency. The elements of butch/femme lie in oppression, but we do not languish there.

Hence, butch/femme is a way of being, sometimes a lesbian ontology, played consciously, but often skipping out in forms too quick to catch. It is now and then too close to call, too subtle to name directly, a localized culture, actualizing the discrete specificities and corporealities of our lives. Butch/femme is a tangible articulation, a form of lesbian desire which rubs up against us and becomes us, in our particular daily practices, in our mannerisms, in our deportment, in our sexual responses, in the diaphanous but ordinary dispositions of our days. Elspeth Probyn's comments on queer desire have resonance for butch/femme too:



The singularity of queer desire may reside in the ways in which it puts the body, bodies, and bits of bodies to work hyphenating connections. The momentum here is rhizomatic, with stems of images carrying both their roots and shoots; the image constantly turns itself inside out. Or, as Foucault puts it in one of his rare comments on lesbians, 'sexual relations are immediately transferred into social relations and the social relations are understood as sexual relations'.⁴

As Elizabeth Grosz has said before her, we need to 'look at lesbian relations and if possible, all social relations in terms of bodies, energies, movements, inscriptions'.⁵ Butch/femme can be described as a dynamic, a conversation between bodies which fuses and disperses desire in ways that can exceed predetermination.

Sometimes it's hard to be a woman, giving all your love to other women. When the two arms you want to cling to, and the something warm you want to come to, when you want to be proud of her, and show the world you love her, and keep giving her all the love you can – sometimes it's hard to be a woman. How would high-femme Tammy Why-Not, to appropriate one of Lois Weaver's stage characters, be this woman, hold this woman? The butch/femme system circulates around conceptions of womanhood. A recurring trope of the butch is that she is a failed woman (too little woman), or of the femme that she is a hyper-woman (too much woman). The shadow of womanhood skates butch/femme. For femmes talking about being a woman is often a passion, an aspiration, both being and becoming, it is playing for real. Butches talk about womanhood less, their ambivalence swings between secret pride, shame, and protested irrelevance – this denial of womanhood is predicated upon a similar, but muted

elevation. The two most public lesbian genders are butch and femme. Whether as the singular categories butch and femme, or as the 'co-dependent' entity butch/femme, these lesbian genders have facilitated lesbian sex, lesbian desire, for decades. Butch/femme has become a form of self-representation for lesbians; it gives lesbian desire a partial, sometimes reluctant, entry into the symbolic realm of language and culture. In the hegemonic sense, we are women, but we are something else too.

Is butch/femme the way she smokes a cigarette, shapes her mouth, wears her Levis, takes you into her body – or not, touches her breasts – or not, bites her hot dog, builds her shoulders, shops for clothing, is silent or talks? Is it in the poise of her hand? Is it in the kind of risks she takes? The way she presses you against a wall? Which one of you has the cock, to have or to hold? (As Lacan put it, virility can only be made manifest on the body of a woman – if so, where is butch/femme desire located?) Does she go into her closet to feel real? How do we approach the painful subtleties of butch/femme, the yearning to be recognized, the reflex that pulls, the propulsion towards each other which can so often end in retreat? Butch/femme is all the intricate things, and the melancholy too, perhaps also the perversely gainful validation of being dysphoric in a culture which demands gender congruence.

Coming out into the modern Lesbian and Gay Movement we have celebrated a rubric of pride. Outside, in this context, meant claiming a place in society. Inside carried the connotations of the closet, as a prison of shame. The lesbian inside/outside structure is characterized by this *affect* – the binary opposition of shame/pride.⁶ Pride is dependent on shame; pride is predicated on the – sometimes conscious – denial of its own ostracized corollary, shame. This explains the hegemony of pride in the post-Stonewall era, as a strategic deployment against the pathological homo. Cognizant of our outlaw status, we imposed a heterodoxical sense of pride. Its counterpoint of shame is no more (or less) real – it is not a deeper truth – but equally it is a consequence of social location. I don't want to reinscript a 'cultural probity' of homosexual shame here, reinventing the iconography of victimization, and playing into the hands of homophobia. Pride remains strategically essential, but shame and its effects are powerful historical players, and cannot be rhetorically subsumed. Even in the nineteenth century, shame can be traced as standing for homosexuality itself: Alfred Douglas's poem 'In Praise of Shame' (1894) was read for its implications during the Oscar Wilde trials, as shame, in common historical parlance, was understood as a synonym for homosexuality.⁷ I want to consider here how butch/femme, although commonly read as the proud and visible, public statement of lesbian desire, can also be marked by shame, can reinscribe shame.

Reclaiming a debased identity, and reconstructing a new self as a survivor, are replete with the symbolism of heroism. It is a movement of struggle, re-appropriation, and triumph. During the 1980s and 1990s we have reclaimed butch/femme as the erotic symbol *par excellence*. Needfully, the publications up until now have been predominantly celebratory. Perhaps now we can afford, perhaps we need, more artful reflection, to ask the difficult questions, as Jewelle Gomez does, about why a primarily working-class identification has become colonized as middle-class, white, and chic, to ask how its re-presentation has been selective, and to consider why we want to emulate a butch/femme aesthetic ironically, not procure it as authentic. An ambivalence to butch/femme often replays the assumption that those bar dykes in the 1950s and 1960s were too thick to know what they were doing, and really did want to be straight. Perhaps we have, as Judith Roof indicates, transposed a fetishized racial difference

onto gender difference. Perhaps we have appropriated heterosexual gender binarism because of its pretensions to sexual realness. Perhaps the shame in butch/femme is recalcitrant because we suspect we are a failed copy. I am suggesting that the edifice of *Pride* may be a shaky one, and I am reminded that in classical literature the great male heroes *suffer* from pride, that it can be a vice, and even, a tragedy.

Shame produces a shattering of the self, and sexual shame creates a nexus of wreckage. Shame is the psychic result of a shattered self which has been fucked by society. It is this conjunction which makes the butch's fantasy of impermeability simultaneously sad and brave. The butch knows full well the momentary annihilation of lesbian sex, too. The toil and exertion expended in the maintenance of her masculine boundaries of selfhood in a hostile world can be temporarily relaxed. Her vulnerability is fetishized in lesbian culture because it is her visible pleasure and pain which mark the preservation and continuance of a public lesbian identity. For the butch, sex is profoundly important because it can be the one place where she is allowed to refigure the self without shame. Hence the romantic bathos of butch identity; in the crippling grief of a ruined love affair her sense of self is demolished, lost, she is reduced once again to an open wound.

Shame is also a Woman. Femme shame can occur when her *femineity* – Clare Whatling's neologism – collapses into an abjected heterosexual femininity, as when Heather Findlay so poignantly expresses her fear that she had 'been a fucking housewife' all along. Retrospective shame is always so distinctively bitter, as it carries the potency of revelation. Shame underwrites femme identity in more subtle ways than the butch, but it is there. Shame prowls around the sexually 'voracious' woman: shame on her desire, and on her body which marks that desire. Shame also berates the femme, like all women, for not being a real woman, for being insufficient, lacking, empty, and unfulfilled without the penis. Femme shame can emerge when what she really, really wants is the (lesbian) cock, but she is not allowed to show it, or say it. Femme shame can also occur when her lesbianism is not perceived as 'enough', when her lipstick, heels, and hair leave her hanging around at the bar, unseen, unrecognized, unadored. Femme shame can turn into femme guilt when she is able to pass, and butches often wilfully misunderstand it, their own jealous resentment occluding her forfeiture.

For lesbians, shame sediments specifically in the swamp of female sexuality. It is interminably difficult for women to resist experiencing some shame about our bodies, particularly around our genitals and sexual behaviours. Outsider status simultaneously speaks sexuality and silences it, as the protagonist is defined, and then delegitimated. Spatial metaphors mark the 'fallen' woman as an outlaw; she is cast from here to there, recalling the historical linkage of lesbianism with prostitution, as Joan Nestle so courageously and controversially pointed out in *A Restricted Country*.⁸ In his essay, 'Emotions and Identity: A Theory of Ethnic Nationalism', Thomas Scheff describes how the experience of exclusion provides the motor for ethnic nationalism. He proposes the pride/shame hypothesis: 'Pride generates and signals solidarity, shame is an indicator and cause of alienation'.⁹ Scheff describes shame as the most social and reflexive of emotions because it always involves the consciousness of self from the point of view of the other. The self surveys itself. Shame and honour are conferred by others. He discusses Helen Block Lewis's research¹⁰ into how most shame goes unacknowledged, and is usually bypassed or disguised as another disparate, vague feeling, hence 'one need not *feel* ashamed to be in a state of shame'¹¹ (and conversely, one need not *be*

ashamed to feel shame). In shame, the self feels weak, powerless, and fragmentary. Shame crucially involves feelings of exposure. Gershen Kaufman describes it as 'being seen in a diminished sense'.¹² The following passage from Scheff describes the dynamic:

The most dramatic cues for both overt and bypassed states of shame in social interaction involve gaze direction . . . Overt, undifferentiated shame leads to furtiveness, looking down or away, with only an occasional sidelong glance at the other. A normal gaze involves turn-taking, first looking at the other, then away. Finally, bypassed shame results in continuous looking at the other, attempting to stare them down.¹³

The heterosexual gaze has a doubling effect – to include at the same time as it casts out. It is an act of appropriation, owning, and non-consensual classification replete with voyeurism. The heterosexual gaze is intended to mark us: the glance is a strike. The heterosexual gaze is a profoundly exposing stigmatization, and as an act of shaming its effect is to paralyse. The contradiction, of course, is that it is also a desiring gaze, a too revealing repudiation. The idea of an outside depends on the conceptualization of an outer space, but the paradox of the perverse¹⁴ is that it is constantly closing in, its near intimacy an erotic enjambment. The cell's walls are porous, absorption is taking place, inside/outside closes in. Even if I look away, as the perpetrator enacts the gaze, his (or her) gaze is captured, polluted. Gazing is also a sophisticated language of gay and lesbian courtship, the nuances of various looks, lingering, direct, frequent, or oblique characterizing the preliminaries of street or bar interaction, and there is the 'overhanging 'dyke stare', the eyes held by a stranger fractionally longer than decorously necessary, establishing a deft, brief and secret kinship, a mirroring, which colludes to simultaneously acknowledge and rebut shame.

Shame occurs when we internalize an ideal we are not able to meet; we become ashamed, punishing ourselves, and projecting this onto others whom we include in our failure. For example: butch baiting, especially from other butches, is a product of this failure ('You aren't a real butch, because . . .'). An aspect of this is the competitiveness shame produces, a measuring of oneself against an internalized and projected ideal,¹⁵ and a desire to make others fail in comparison to ourselves ('I'm butcher than you'). This does not promote butch diversity, it idealizes an impossible category.

Shame as a centred identity has historical resonance in lesbian culture. Representations of the abjected stone butch abound in the middle-class cultures of lesbian feminism. She is recently being recast/reversed as a *proud* and honourable tradition.¹⁶ The spectre of the 'too butch' persona has haunted lesbians, where butch is the distilled and visible embodiment of lesbian desire. This not only connotes sexual shame, but also represents the splitting off of shamed parts of the self. Stone butches seem to inhabit the sexual shadows of the lesbian corpus, cast there in an unacknowledged conspiracy of shame. The invocation 'For Shame!' enforces ejection from society, simultaneously conjoining its declaimants, conferring coveted membership of a branding élite. These structures of displacement can be read as incessantly deferred and variable attempts to come to terms with one's own despised difference. These manoeuvres commonly display contempt, an affect closely allied to shame. Whereas it is important to explore the ambivalence we have towards the stone butch, perhaps in the style of Nice Rodriguez's loving tease, we also need to ask whether her

untouchability constitutes, in Ann Cvetkovich's essay, a refigured style of gendered expression, a vulnerable tension held between private and public, internal and external needs.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has written about shame as 'Queer Performativity'. Shame results from the failure of contact, from the absence of recognition; it constitutes a break in social affection, recalling early intimacy with a parent figure whose disapproval seems to threaten our potential to thrive:

shame and identity remain in very dynamic relation to one another, at once reconstituting and foundational, because shame is both peculiarly contagious and peculiarly individuating. Many developmental psychologists consider shame the affect that most defines the space wherein a sense of self will develop.¹⁷

Shame is about what one is, or made to be; but it can also be a transformative experience. At the moment one is cast out, one enters a new space of definition, and individuation. Thus at the moment of othering, this split forces a new self to rise and form. (Or fall and die.) The space of development is already substantially predetermined, but like the self, it is constantly in motion, and amenable to flux:

at least for certain ('queer') people, shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity: one that has its own, powerfully productive and powerfully social metamorphic possibilities.¹⁸

Shame is a foundational moment in lesbian identity, and, I am arguing, butch/femme identity. Like most psychic structures its pattern is to repeat. We interminably reconstitute our lesbian pride out of shame. (Perhaps we need to reconsider Judith Butler's claim that the origin of gender identity resides in melancholia.¹⁹) By addressing shame we can reforge the bond, not with the original parent, nor with the symbolic blaming parent – social opprobrium – but with each other. This is a survival issue: we can learn to actively forget the pain, panic, and apathy of shame. The aim is not to magically commute shame into pride but to revision shame as facilitating a kind of agency or motility. Butler addresses the potentiality of 'queer':

The term 'queer' has operated as one linguistic practice whose purpose has been the shaming of the subject it names, or, rather, the producing of a subject through that shaming interpellation. 'Queer' derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult. This is an invocation by which a social bond among homophobic communities is formed through time.²⁰

A response based on empathetic identification leads to a kind of love which does not indulge victimhood, but listens to and affirms the individual's experience of cultural alienation as potentially disengaging from her dependence on heterosexist support.²¹ Subjectivity, or selfhood can then be predicated on the disavowal of heterosexuality; although this repudiation runs the risk of reification, it can also potentially liberate. Liberate into refractory forms such as butch, and femme.

What Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has called the 'irreducible incoherence' of homosexual identity – the contrariety of the minoritizing view on the one hand ('real' gays constitute a separate population), and the universalizing on the other (all men are queer, although

some are more queer than others)²² – is reducible to the inside/outside dichotomy on which pride/shame is predicated, as a transposition. Diana Fuss, writing in 1991, encouraged the reader to explore the dialectic of inside/outside to the point of 'critical exhaustion', at the same time reminding us that:

The problem, of course, with the inside/outside rhetoric, if it remains undeconstructed, is that such polemics disguise the fact that most of us are both inside and outside at the same time. Any misplaced nostalgia for or romanticization of the outside as a privileged site of radicality immediately gives us away, for in order to idealize the outside we must already be, to some degree, comfortably entrenched on the inside. We really only have the leisure to idealize the subversive potential of the power of the marginal when our place of enunciation is quite central.²³

This admonition, rather than instigating resignation through its reorientation of the inside as the privileged site, should incite the reader to appropriate the kinds of knowledges growing out of her locatedness within different social positions to allow for strategic *cross-identifications*, which can drive a passage. The lesbian's place in culture is bounded by porous membranes: it is always already tentative, mutable, relative, and transitory. Examining the structures of feeling emerging from this (dis)placement, this radical disintegration, expedites a localized, specific politics. When the self is shattered into a kaleidoscope of splintered images, the transformation of personal experience into action depends on seeing in the many reflections, empathetic identifications with kindred struggles. As a trope, the inside/outside dichotomy is a cardinal axiom of lesbian politics; simultaneously we understand that the mirror of the outside distorts, and jeers the picture. A consideration of how butch/femme can be inside and outside, in the many twists of that dichotomy, can only facilitate a more knowing resistance. Maybe we can take Ann Cvetkovich's formulation of femme desire as 'active receptivity' as a model for these social transformations.²⁴

Dualisms of outside and inside rule the butch/femme existence. Butch/femme is a liminal state, which the concomitant obsession with boundaries exposes – who is the 'real' butch/femme, how are we different (or not) from woman, or indeed man? But categories such as butch and femme seem to transcend our inside knowledges. They rapidly become aspirational, totemic, or just plain remote. We approach them with a sideways movement, with suspicion. At the same time we try to inhabit them from the inside, we displace them from our experiences, as though they are not simultaneously in us, and for us. Butch/femme, like masculinity and femininity, become genders which carry their own imperatives, and thus, ambivalences. This creates a set of anxieties around performance which have been mirrored in the book's production. Many contributors expressed hesitant uneasiness with their pieces, expressing a certain dilemma about the inside/outside status of their work. The attempt, I think, is not to reify butch/femme, but to enable us to cathect with it, even be disturbed by it, and certainly to theorize it. Sometimes it is hard to theorize where you live, because at the same time that we want to gain agency over our desires, looking too closely can disrupt them painfully. Gender is troubling.

The vacillation between outside and inside constructions of social space, and outside and inside constructions of identity, means the butch/femme space is an embattled one, on the street, in the bar, and in the bedroom. But osmosis as a process of

disruption is an effect of desire: in sex the boundaries of the body melt, and merge. Butch and femme are primarily *erotic* designations. Within that tenderness is a sometimes violent and destructive assault on the subject's autonomy. Catherine Waldby, writing on the heterosexual male body, contends:

Erotic pleasure arguably requires a kind of momentary annihilation or suspension of what normally counts as 'identity', the conscious, masterful, self-identical self, lost in the 'little death' of orgasm. These momentary suspensions, when linked together in the context of a particular relationship, work toward a more profound kind of ego destruction . . . each lover is refigured by the other, made to bear the mark of the other upon the self. But all such transformation involves the breaking down of resistance, of violence to an existing order of the ego.²⁵

Whereas in heterosexual masculinity 'the rest of the body is drained of erotic potential in favour of its localisation in the penis',²⁶ in lesbian sexuality all surfaces can carry erotic signification, distributing the fixed phallus of heterosexual masculinity across the body. The terrain of butch and femme bodies is often a battlefield upon which gender warriors fall, and often, onto their own swords. Butch/femme relations are beset, as Linda Hart points out, with aggressive incorporation and annihilation. Although I support butch/butch and femme/femme configurations, I also wonder how the dynamics of butch/femme couplings specifically materialize and disrupt the identities we cling to; I wonder how to question how we can critically perceive hostility as a transformational possibility. There is violence in butch/femme, the violence of differentiation, supposedly necessary for the generation of desire. Butch/femme is precious, but it is also fraught.

The profound jubilation/melancholia that attends lesbian identity evolves from the pride/shame dichotomy which is implicit within models of outside and inside. Hence, by positing a book like this as simply being about butch and femme celebration – butch and femme pride – I run the risk of reinscribing shame as an indefatigable dynamic of lesbian identity. The tenacity of this structure is difficult to underestimate, but the contributions here are not merely circumscribed by positive imagery. The pieces traverse the range of experiences and emotions which are attached to the butch/femme sensibility. That is the book's main strength. I dislike introductions that force a homogeneity onto a collection of disparate voices, and I don't want to perform that gesture here, submitting diversity to an authorial monologic. The themes that weave through the book proliferate, and my partial reading cannot stand as the definitive one. Editing this collection has often been a process of courtship, eliciting the intimacies of some essays, flirting with the unsayable, and expanding common grounds of identification, moments of empathy with others. Going into butch/femme with a critical intelligence is to initiate reflections in the writer and the reader which maybe before have only been sub-vocal, intuitive, or blurred. The book, in part, is about making butch/femme more visible, or even, to sharpen the gaze with which to see. The photographs, for example, as Cherry Smyth writes, highlight the difficult elusiveness of representing butch/femme, while they also inspire a double-take, a chance to see butch/femme awry. The venture remains inflected with pride; we laud visibility because we need identification, but sometimes the sentiments expressed here are flinty, ambiguous, and secretive. Many of the contributors are centrally concerned with the visibility issue, historically because of the conjunctions between butchness as the visual

sign of lesbianism, or contrarily, femmeness as erased through being read as an invisible secret. Visibility and non-visibility are linked to issues of pride and shame, and to the ambivalence with which our desires inhabit the symbolic realm of representation. Shane Phelan writes of the homophobia that excludes butch visibility from public assimilationist discourse, Anna Marie Smith writes of the simultaneous punishing exposure and erasure of Jennifer Saunders's butch persona, my own piece expresses the disequilibrium that the visible butch presence provokes in toilets. Many of the essays turn on the conundrum of recognition, whether endorsing the *magia* of the Greek butch in Nina Rapi's overview, or ruing the lack of a coherent theory of the femme/femme cinematic gaze in Clare Whatling's, or in Clare Hemmings' piece, which points out the erasure of bisexual femme subjectivity. In Louise Carolin and Catherine Bewley's participatory study of London femmes, the issue seems so clearly to be about femmes' need to see each other, yet they also regret the things which cannot be said, or seen. In Lois Weaver's poem, the fact that Sheila can't seem to dance with Sheila becomes both poignant and protective. Judith Halberstam's essay, too, is an attempt to write into recognition the profound importance of butch/butch mentoring, and as I read this I was able to acknowledge my own debts to openly butch women in a new way. Sue-Ellen Case asks us to revision the 1970s in order to see the presence of the hippie butch in San Francisco bar life, to implode the received wisdom of that enduring binarism 'lesbian feminists v. butch/femme', and let amalgamated, cross-identities come into view. Similarly, Emma Donoghue shows us how nineteenth-century lesbian desire was celebrated in a public marital ritual, an historical return which seems so pertinent to contemporary debates. In contemporary culture, visibility may seem to offer a radical presence, but in Lisa Walker's interviewing of pierced butches and femmes, she teases out some of the contradictions of this visibility, and shows how imperceptibly it might be reinscribed into dominant gender paradigms; Walker offers her own narrative suggesting that tactile, rather than visual, clues render eroticism more immediate.

Far from being sentimentally unreflective, the pieces in this collection also intend to offer up the mirror of estrangement, so we can think about these categories in new ways, combining the critical eye with affect. Many of the essays take the form of traditional academic analyses, but there are also contributions which choose the form of fantasy, written by performance artists or poets. The false polarization between 'theory' and 'creativity' is a glib caricature that ignores how theoretical intimacy, and critical creativity, converge. Some of the most reflective expressions of butch/femme have appeared as fiction, in Esther Newton's quest for an Alice, in the chiaroscuro of Gerry Gomez Pearlberg's poetry, in the image of butch hands Cherry Smyth draws out so reverently, or in the chaotic and burlesque drag king performances by Dréd. In a ripe parody of blaxploitation movies, Dréd's tableaux interrogate the blending of butch/femme with black stereotypes. My hope is that all the pieces in this collection communicate the complexity of butch/femme without sacrificing the emotional integrity with which these identities are lived. As we know, social taxonomies such as race, class, sexuality and gender are not lived compartmentally, but, like Audre Lorde's lacquered layerings,²⁷ are interlaced, inseparable at the point of experience.

For some, butch/femme is a stylish accoutrement, a seemingly optional dress code which shuns the supposed naiveté of 'heavy roles'. For others, butch/femme is an essential anathema, a heterosexual mimeticism, an outsider discourse antithetical to feminism. Some will read this book suspiciously, even antagonistically, some will try to

take an anthropological gaze. In Clare Whatling's earlier essay on *A Restricted Country* she commented, 'The butch/femme stance does not necessarily imply a direct visual copying of heterosexuality. Nestle's statement rather demonstrates the exorbitant trust our culture puts in the specular. It also illustrates how appearance can deceive.'²⁸

Our relationship to heterosexuality is paradoxical and vexed. We have adopted heterosexual iconography, but we reproduce it in masquerade, as a knowing copy, thus, as an analogy which cannot simply return to a reidealized, retrenched, original. Any discussion in this mode is indebted to Judith Butler's work on drag and performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993). Butler argues that anyone who is interpellated as queer by homophobic discourse has the potential to cite back, hyperbolically, in a gesture that can transform abjection through parody. This parody must reflect and dispute. The tendency in critical writing has been to trust this manoeuvre to the intentions of the author, or to the credence of the audience, a notoriously slippery hope. Reiterating the caution expressed in *Bodies That Matter*, it is important to stress that this destabilization is not necessarily voluntaristic, and that good intentions can have unforeseen consequences. Even as we invest butch/femme with radically resignifying possibilities, there are variable, latent effects that cannot be predicted, or withheld. Our attachment to, investment in, butch/femme is not a guarantee of political viability, or credibility. Butch/femme is not a neutral subject; it is an institution of the puissant synthesis of lesbian sex, and gender. We seem to oscillate between understandings of gender formation which presuppose that we are subjected to endless repetitions, occasionally and accidentally cadenced by random variations, or a chirpy, spontaneous kind of pomo-homo who clicks for gender-to-go. We need to put this paradox to use, and, theorizing from its volatile commingling, figure out what we are, and what we want to participate in. What counts is not so much *being* butch/femme, as *doing* butch/femme, to try to ensure that posing doesn't become dozing, to make the self work. And play. Being inside lesbian gender need not always be a drag.

The Marriage of Heaven y Hielo: A Love Narrative of Sorts

GERRY GOMEZ PEARLBERG

Think well and be a king,
Think more and think again

– Gertrude Stein, from
Before the Flowers of Friendship Faded Friendship Faded

Benson & Hedges swap candycorn hats,
leopard-spotted leotards,
leather caps, Orangina
tutus, and semiotic big black boots.

Benson & Hedges: two marshmallows on a stick
impaled by fire.

Benson says: *Long live the King.*
King = top of the lesbian crop.

Benson's got a thing for King.
Hedges goes along for the ride.

King is an apothecary of desire, flooded
with rose-tinted cross-bone syrups
that magically transgress
to coughdrop green in bottles
hung from cage-like ceiling slings
of silver chain. King
paces her telescopic castle halls
of fanfare and fan tracery,
hourglasses, measuring cups,
and flasks of sleeping tongue.

Benson & Hedges, whose brains are blades,
glide toward the castle gate
wearing armors of intent for their
double-date with destiny.
Their lives a skating rink,
their silver blades saw stories into ice
flicking grit and ice cubes
in each other's eyes: those cocktail
party sound-effects of desire pouring in.

King is a cold fish, an effigy of herself on fire.
Burning always (or so it seems) on someone else's
castle wall.

Desire is more than lipstick and a mouth.
It gnaws at Benson from the inside out.
False teeth, saber-tooth Swiss Army knives,
bicuspids, cupid's bows.
Benson has no date of birth, no ID card.
No beginning, middle, or end to what she wants,
that spiraling infinity of the reaching
for the out-of-reach.

King, an icon herself,
has a shelf of unwanted icons:
pin-headed dolls from ex's who hate her,
holograms from the scenes of the crime,
and a tarnished crown that whispers 'Don't ask.'

Sometimes King would like to rearrange her furniture:
replace the love seat with a single bed, toss out
the horsewhip and the other princely props,
pinprick the royal velvet cushions, deflate
the pedestal and throne. It's lonely being a top.

Sometimes Benson wishes an older, wiser Benson
would take matters into her own hands,
but that would be like putting a gun
to her head, blowing away the stellar

system of everything she knows
 she cannot have, that parallel universe
 of not-so-laughable lapses that always
 seem to keep her
 in the game.

Desire waves from the castle gate like a monogrammed
 hanky.

The initials keep changing but the script's always the
 same:

handwriting of a lonely girl trying to live up to being King.
 It isn't easy being a man. It isn't easy being on top.

Tonight, the stars hovering by King's castle are
 alchemical,
 an unfamiliar alphabet

souping down a river

of new water,

a new water

one can skate across,
 soft water transmuting all-too-readily to gold.

The night is a moat with a drawbridge that says: *Identify
 yourself to the dark.*

King is a constellation shifting in the sky.
 On this and every other night she'll sleep
 and rise
 with both boots on.

It isn't easy being the cream of the crop
 and it's lonely, lonely, lonely
 at the top.

Sailor

GERRY GOMEZ PEARLBERG

The girls go by in their sailor suits
They catch my eye in their sailor suits
Big or slight they all grin like brutes
In steam-ironed pants and buffed jet boots
They saunter right up my alley.

I study their easy, confident strides
Crew cuts and white hats capping decadent eyes
They shiver the pearl on night's oystery prize
They shiver me timbers, unbuckle me thighs
This alley was made for seething.

From the sweat of a street lamp or lap of the sea
A smooth sailor girl comes swimming to me
Says she wants it right now and she wants it for free
Clamps her palms to my shoulders, locks her knees to
my knees
This alley was made for cruising.

Her face is dark coffee, her head has no hair
Her cap shines like neon in the bristling night air
She pins her brass metals to my black brassiere
Tucks her teeth like bright trophies behind my left ear
This alley is very rewarding.

She tosses her jacket and rolls up her sleeves
On her arm's a tattoo of an anchor at sea
She points to the anchor and whispers 'That's me.'
And the wetter I get the more clearly I see
This alley was made for submersion.

Her fingers unbutton my 501s
 This girl's fishing for trouble and for troubling fun
 She slides off her gold rings and they glint like the sun
 Then she smirks, rubs her knuckles, and spits out her
 gum
 This alley was made for swooning.

Now she's pushing her prow on my ocean's sponge wall
 Uncorking my barnacle, breaking my fall
 And there's pink champagne fizzling down my decks and
 my hall
 As she wrecks her great ship on my bright port-of-call
 This alley was made for drowning.



Sailor Jack (Del LaGrace, 1994)

On Meeting Ruthann

ELISSA G. PERRY

1

'Y'all gettin things together down there?' Big Mama called from upstairs.

'Yes, Ma'am,' I called back and kept on piling wood next to the fireplace.

Mood was a low moving haze making haste difficult. It rolled around the room evident in the slow bounce of a crossed leg. There was a hum of words and something else in the parlor as brown hands held brown drinks to painted lips. The girls relaxed as much as possible in fine silks and laces. There was a healthy fire in its place and Lucille Bogan crackled from the phonograph pop and fizz and fizzle and moan. The dustless red and gold rug, faded by time until one color ran into the next, had the blues in every string of its tired fringe.

Big Mama kept the big old house clean but after years of use, it had acquired a feeling of permanence that contradicted its age. Ashy wood, worn blues and time-induced off-white. Her home housed a family-run business but me and her and Jimmy were the only folks that lived there. Sometimes girls might stay for a piece, but we knew the laughter, chills and sighs that stayed in corners until we were all alone.

The last log on the top of the stack, I swept up the splinters with the small brush and pan. I saw a stray piece of wood each time I was about to get up. After a while I started to see specks of things to sweep where they didn't exist. Haints waited in other places. Warmth and familiarity kept me in.

'I think you got them all, Jr.' The lilt in Miss Ann's voice cleared a path for me to leave.

'Bye, Jr.' Miss Carol spoke with a smile in her voice that gave away the tilted angle of her head. The others were intent upon whatever was their conversation.

'Evening, all.' It sounded lower than I had expected. A curved piece of iron with a handle rested heavy in the crook of my fingers even though it was now emptied of wood. The two of them laughing overshadowed the feeling. Redirect.

On the stairs of the back porch the uneven slabs spoke their age as I shifted my hips in search of comfort. Summer gave up for the year that evening and there was a chill in the air that turned my breath into smoke. The sky was spitting a little but I had worked up a sweat that evening, changing the sheets and wash basins, splitting wood and stacking it next to the fireplaces. I was waiting for Chucky to finish his dinner and whistle from the alley so we could go to JT's house.

I took a swig of Pepsi-Cola out of its thick glass bottle. It was the same color as Big Mama's eyes. She said she got them from her daddy. I didn't know much about him except that he had light eyes.

The thick black hair of her Choctaw mama laid on Big Mama's head in grease-stiff waves back to a knot held real neat at the top of her neck. It was always in the same place just above the fur collar of the gabardine coat she wore to meet important people like local politicians. Since she'd got to St Louis from LeFlore county, Mississippi, she'd had the town in the watch pocket of her pinstriped suit.

What I really wanted to do was play checkers with Miss Lila like we would on occasion. Black and red circles on red and black squares. A game for two, no more no less, on a molasses afternoon. I knew better than to ask. Come evening time on business nights I was supposed to disappear so I'd be more easily forgotten. On occasion, I would be asked to work the downstairs. Bringing people drinks, tending the fire and getting fresh water for the basins. Tonight was not one of those nights. I was getting too old – too able to find meaning in innuendo.

Miss Lila was my favorite of the women. She was different than the others. She was more gentle but not in a way I can really explain. Trying to compare her with the others is like trying to compare grape Nehji with tobasco – they're just different. She was kind of like how I remembered my mama but nicer.

One time when we were playing checkers she started asking me questions.

'When you gonna stop hanging around with boys all the time, Jr.? Look atcha, even got a boy's nickname?'

'My name's Jr 'cause everybody says I'm just like Big Mama and besides, I don't like girls.' I moved one of my last remaining checker pieces.

I had told her months before to stop losing on purpose and play for real. I was not a hild. I hadn't won not once since then. Marbles was my game of choice. I was not grown.

She was dressed up that day but her face wasn't heavily painted. Her skin was so copper. I'd once heard Mr Henderson say that people were made from earth and I figured Miss Lila must have been made from that real red dirt by the river.

'But I'm a girl' Miss Lila said, thinking about her next move.

'But you're different,' I told her while she jumped my last two men and took them off the board.

I put the game away, envious that it had a proper place, and started outside before Big Mama came downstairs.

'Keep practising Jr,' Miss Lila had called after me. 'You're getting better.' *We shall meet again.* I didn't want to leave and I don't think she wanted me to either.

I took the last swallow of Pepsi and started walking towards Chucky's house, I didn't want to wait anymore.

Chucky leaned over his neckbones and hot water cornbread like it would disappear if not eaten fast enough. Their daddy was done eating and in the front room. His sister was at the sink doing dishes. Their mama had passed the year before. Big Mama said she died from too much work and too much heartbreak. Nobody talked about her much but when they did it was always 'Poor Miss Martha' with a shake of the head or 'I don't know why she is still there. He ain't that much to look at', with a neck roll the exclamation point of body language. 'Poor' was as much a part of her name as Martha.

I looked at his sister while I tried to be patient with Chucky. Her legs looked sturdy coming from beneath the blue flounces of skirt. The way a calf tapered to an ankle then disappeared into a snugly laced shoe. It was new to me.

'Hi, Joline.' She spoke without taking her eyes from the sink.

Upon hearing my given name the moist heat of food-laden dishwater was suddenly in my stomach. Her speaking was a challenge to speak back. Gravity pulled steadily. I returned the greeting right away, embarrassed like I was greeting an adult.

'Good evening, Ruthann.'

If I lived with my daddy would my life be like hers? She scrubbed hard on a dish that looked clean. There were small spots of pink where flowers had probably once been. I thought the plate would break down the middle from the pressure and was relieved when she rinsed it and put it to the side until it was time to dry. *It sure don't look like a good life to me*, I thought, then turned my head back to Chucky.

Come on, boy. Wanting to order and beg at the same time I shifted my weight.

'Let's go.' Chucky pushed his chair back from the table deepening the ruts in the old speckled floor. I realized I'd been holding my breath and exhaled.

'Bye, Joline.' I still couldn't see her face but would not have wanted to meet her eyes if I could.

'Bye, Ruthann.'

Chucky had gotten his coat off the hook by the back door. The trim was newly painted butter and the wallpaper a permanent spring ending neatly at the frame. He shrugged the jacket over his shoulder on his way out, steadily chewing the food he had shoved in his mouth.

He proposed that we go to my house after swallowing.

'It's the weekend and they've got a lot of customers.'

'I know,' Chucky grinned. 'Can't we just sneak and watch?'

'How now. You can't sneak and do nothing with your big self anyway. Be done knocked every time you go over.' I pushed him on his shoulder. Big Mama probably wouldn't've had a fit if we'd dropped some more wood to bring in to them, but I just didn't want Chucky in there. I kicked a rock, his eyes falling to the leather of his shoes. Chucky made me mad sometimes. Something about the way he looked at Big Mama's girls made me want to knock him down and stomp on him.

I decided we should go on over to JT's and took off running. It was time for him to be home from working at the gym where his father was a two-bit trainer. Corner store, Mr Henderson's place, tripe shop, flower stand . . . they were all blurry as my legs pumped as fast as they would go. I being taller, Chucky being fatter, he gave up on trying to keep pace and slowed to walk again. Rounding the corner was a fat black cat. Which way to step? I was approaching quickly and did not want to trip. Before I made a decision it was already under a parked car. Its tail thumped the tire without noise.

Nobody knew where that cat came from. It didn't have too many teeth. I found that out when I threw rocks at it one time. The cat arched up, tail in the air, hair standing up and mouth pulled wide and hissing. It never attacked anybody that I knew of but I never knew anyone who could touch it either.

JT came out on the front porch happy to get away from arguing with his sisters over the radio. Another boy came over from across the street, Chucky showed, and we sat on the porch for a while. I listened to them talking about the fights, arguing over if anybody could beat Archie Moore. JT was convinced that he could someday.

I really didn't say much that night. I wasn't much interested in the fights. I was thinking about the future. I knew that in five years, maybe ten at the outside, I was supposed to marry somebody like JT. The thought itself didn't scare me too much because I just couldn't even picture it. When I tried, there was blankness, a picture show screen, an

empty piece of paper and rushing blood. I didn't know too many married people. I mean they were around everywhere but like extras playing a necessary but undeveloped part.

What did scare me was that I didn't have any idea what else to do. I wanted to maybe go to college. Big Mama wanted me to go too. 'My Baby's going to college,' she would say on occasion.

The only college I'd ever seen was the one over on Olive Street. St Louis University. We passed it on the way downtown sometimes. All the girls had on skirts and sweaters with pins on them. When I go to college I'm not wearing that.

When I told Mr Gambier at school last year about my plans for college his burst of belly laughter had squashed me like a penny under the burden of a railroad car. I became stretched out, faceless, flat, and worthless.

After a while, JT went in the house and came back with some sipping whiskey and marbles. His mama had taken his dice. I was tired of thinking and gladly left my daydream world in favor of a marble world where everything has a purpose and the rules make sense.

2

That winter was colder than the end of the world according to Big Mama. I remember shivering down into my coat but the cold was more inside than out. Its sharpness sunk in and gnawed. At school, the boys and girls started hating each other less than they had the year before, which had been less than the year before that. They would look at each other at recess. Side glances and giggles framed by freshly pressed hair. Hesitant approaches by boys masquerading as young men. Then the occasional corners with fragile couples holding hands.

In search of a corner of my own, I started sneaking my lunch up to the library to eat with the books. I'd jumped at the warm hand on my back 'cause I knew, I had been found out. A heat spread from that hand all over my body getting hotter as it travelled. I hadn't noticed the wool touching my wrists and neck where my undershirt ended, but now they burned. I stared at the speckled wall in front of me wondering who had caught me.

'You really can't eat in here, honey.' It was Miss Carter.

Breath had been caught somewhere, I let it out. She wouldn't report me to the principal's office but wouldn't let me stay either. It seemed like she knew she was sending me into sweaty nightmares of jabs and a knotted stomach but she sent me along anyway with sad eyes and a smile. It seemed corners were only made for one purpose. Will you be my girl?

The cafeteria beckoned me with the low cackle at high volume of a trickster. I looked at my tray as I went down. The grease had started to thicken around the faded vegetables and the meat was ready for the dogs. Where else could I go? It was still too cold for us to be allowed to eat outside, the gymnasium was too risky, and the lavatory was where the girls went to fix their hair and talk about people before class started again.

I heard all the noise before I got there. It thundered from the room and hit me on both shoulders, then squeezed my gut, filling my mouth with spit that tasted like a day-old glass of water.

I glided my tray onto the smoothness at the end of a long table and sank down in the chair. A preposition at the end of a sentence. A curse word in Sunday school. Out of the

corner of my eye, I checked to make sure the girls at the far end weren't looking at me. Ruthann was one of them. She felt my eyes fall on her and turned my gaze back on me. I snatched my eyes back to my tray. These girls always seemed to be dressed to go somewhere real fancy.

They sat up straighter, then leaned back and started talking in a voice like they knew everything. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but then they started talking louder.

'My mama said "somebody ought to take her out of there and teach her to be a proper lady,"' one of the girls was saying.

'You know that's right.' Another one nodded then smiled and said, 'Well, my daddy said "it may take a while to find a man that can stand to look at her, but when she does, she'll probably know all the tricks to keep him."'

'Oooh, girl.' They all laughed. All except Ruthann who only smiled and continued to eat her lunch.

I wished that my whole body could shrink inside itself through the big empty spot in my chest. The weight of my body was pressing against the sides of my head and my fingernails drew red sliver moons on fleshy palms breaking any future Miss Sarah might tell.

I closed my eyes to their sweater sets and processed hair. *I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands – one nation under God indivisible, with liberty . . .* I could still hear them laughing. I covered my ears with my hands and hummed. *Jingle Bells Jingle Bells Jingle all the way. . . Hotdammit.* I stopped in the middle of the song. When I opened my eyes, none of them were looking in my direction. I uncovered my ears but they weren't finished yet.

'What does she dress like that?'

'I can't believe your mama lets you out of the house.' One of them turned to face me.

'She ain't got no mama,' Marla Dixon jabbed. She was the leader.

'From what I hear she got a whole bunch of 'em. Fancy ones too!' They covered their mouths and laughed.

'You're just better–' I paused for what seemed like an hour not knowing what to say next. I realized I was standing up. 'You just better shut your mouths,' I continued before any of them could say anything. During the long moment I'd thought I had surprised them but they either hid it well or recovered quickly.

'Or what?' One of them looked at me discounting all my bravery in a modified neck roll the shape of a question mark. As her head made the motion small in its range but large in its impact her voice reached my mind slow and misshapen. A record turning too slow on a phonograph. I stood there wishing I'd paid more attention to that boxing stuff so I could just knock them all out with my bare hands. If I hadn't heard myself speak and felt my heart beating with the speeded-up swish-thump of an oil drill I would have thought my whole body was on lock down.

'Ya'll know you need to leave her alone,' Ruthann said before taking a bite of food.

'Please,' one of them gasped as she continued laughing.

The bell rang with the shrillness of a mother bird discovering an empty nest and lunch was over for one more day. I kept looking at the space they had held after they left. I discovered myself staring at the tiles on the opposite wall, not yet gray but too old to still be called baby blue.

I sat in the kitchen playing with left over bread crusts. The radio was on. A saxophone careened with no predetermined course or destination begging me to go on this journey, but I did not want to go. Its insistence was bothersome. A picture of Josephine Baker on the cover of the *Argus* caught my eye.

A Shimmie for Justice. Entertainer, Josephine Baker led a rally attended by six thousand at the Kiel Auditorium last week. The event was organized by the NAACP and the Teamster's Union to call for the desegregation of St Louis schools because of crowded conditions. The leaders urged the school system to follow the lead of Cardinal John A. Ritter who desegregated St Louis' Catholic schools in 1947. . .

Then what would school be like? Muscles flinched from my head up and I thought crying might be next. I stopped reading and put it out of my mind.

Big Mama was in the room too. She wasn't doing anything really, but kept finding little things to keep her in the room. She was waiting for me to say something. She could tell something was wrong. She knew things like that, and I knew she knew, but I didn't know the answer. Clawed notes scraped at my ears in rhythms that could not be anticipated.

She snapped off the radio and without words or movement we did a strange dance to which neither of us knew the steps. The clock on the wall ticked with regularity giving our silence a welcomed rhythm. She went over to it and pushed the plug into the wall although it was already plugged in just fine. Then she went to the electric ice box and checked the freezer, I guess for ice. The old ice box was now in the basement with bottles and cans of beer. I could not think of what to say or how to say it, but I knew I couldn't get up and leave. Something in the dance forbade that. She went to the pantry and came back with her box. She sat down across from me, pulled out a Nat Sherman and tapped the end on the table until the top portion of the tube was hollow paper. She was having her one whiskey and one cigarette like she did every day before business started.

'Jr,' she put the cigarette between her not yet painted lips and lit it. The paper at the lit end collapsed into ash. 'Let me tell you something.' She leaned back a little bit and blew smoke up towards the ceiling. The rings on her fingers were shiny like the ice in her gold drink.

'Now you know when I was coming up we didn't have much . . . We didn't have much in the way of fancy items or live in a big house but those things don't make you anybody special. You can't let those cidity folks fool you.' She sucked on her cigarette again.

'I have made a life for myself out of my own work and my own smarts. Looking pretty can only get you so far in this world. Besides, pretty is as pretty does . . .' She tapped her cigarette on the end of the green glass ashtray then leaned toward me pointing with the smoking stick and I wondered how many whiskeys she'd had. Seemed like this was probably her second. ' . . . and you got more than pretty. You got a good mind to do whatever it is you want. Now, that don't mean things will be easy.' She rested her back against the chair again. 'I reckon you will have your trials and tribulations like everyone else but don't settle for being any less than what you are or what you can put your mind to being.'

'You hearing me?' Her face was that of a stranger. I recognized the smooth almond skin and the clear shimmer of her eyes, but what lay behind them was a mystery. Each time she talked like this, another person came into the room. Invisible and completely unknown.

I had been in the same position for a long time and my legs were heavy and slow to co-operate when I tried to unfold them from under me.

'Yes ma'am.' My voice came out with bubbles. I cleared my throat quietly.

'Alright then. You think on that.' She came over and kissed me on the forehead. I felt the pressure, it was cool on my skin. She meant well but it did not penetrate.

'I'll wash your plate. You go finish your schoolwork and come back to help down here.'

'Yes ma'am.'

I did what I was told. I broke the tip off my pencil on the first math problem. Those girls were stupid in their queer giggling ways. It wasn't Big Mama's fault they were mean, but it was Big Mama I got mad at. It was her those girls were teasing me about. *Why does everything have to be so difficult?*

3

I didn't know I'd been sleeping all winter until it was gone and I woke to birds and bees and flowers. It was eight o'clock in the morning and already warm. I walked down the hall, my books in their leather strap rubbing up against the leg of my new coveralls. The early heat had everyone standing around smiling in new summer outfits and talking about their plans for summer. I wasn't as excited as them. Their springtime preoccupation with each other gave me a kind of freedom in which I could move freely, but in that space there was only me.

It was on my way to homeroom when I stopped to get a drink at the water fountain. I stood at that fountain and took a drink every morning just because I liked that it didn't have a sign over it. Would they put a sign in if they mixed up all the schools?

Coming upright again and wiping my mouth with the back of my free hand, I noticed that Ruthann was leaning up against the wall next to the fountain staring at me. I finished wiping my mouth and looked down at my boots feeling sloppy in her eyes. Somewhere between the inhale and exhale of a deep breath, I decided that if she had something mean to say I was going to let her have it.

'Good morning Ruthann,' I said to her, still looking down.

'Good morning, Joline,' she replied. A smile was present in the sound of her voice. So, I raised my gaze to her face and tried to figure out what to say next. She stood there grinning and looking. I can't tell you what kind of look she had in her eye but it made me want to run away as fast and hard as I could, but moving was not an option. I was a little fly on sticky paper. I hadn't prepared for her to be nice.

The bell rang and I wished she would say something but she just stood there. Her purpose in life, to make me nervous. I gathered my strength to walk away without tripping over any feet or books. I knew her homeroom was in this part of the school because she was in the eighth grade.

'See you later,' was all I could think of. I turned and hurried away in the direction of my seventh grade homeroom. I could feel her eyes on the back of my neck like sunshine until I rounded the corner, then it moved to my lips and I smiled a little.

Until that winter I had been a good student, paid attention and minded the business of learning. When I was feeling smart I was feeling just that. Nothing else. I tried to go back to following the lessons like I had promised Big Mama I would, but that day, I just kept looking out the window. I suppose I was hoping to see Ruthann.

I took a roundabout route home, wandering through the unseasonable warmth stopping to pick up all the worms in danger of frying or being squashed on the sidewalk.

In a shady plot of grass is where I'd put them to rest and if there wasn't any shade I'd drop them to meet their maker.

When I rounded the corner Ruthann was standing up the block talking to Marla. I slowed down, hoping Marla would go into her house before I reached them. She did.

'Ruthann!' I called out to her after Marla had closed her front door.

'Hi,' she said when I caught up. I let myself smile then. It wouldn't look so silly as if I'd been smiling walking by myself.

She handed me her books. I wasn't quite sure why she did that but I took them anyway. They were light and I didn't mind carrying them for her.

She was being careful not to step on any cracks in the sidewalk. She had a way kind of like grownfolks but I could tell she was avoiding those cracks.

'You want to come have some lemonade or something?' she asked me.

'OK or maybe I could take you for a ride on my bicycle.' The corners of my mouth went out even further towards my ears in a motion I couldn't control.

'We'll see, Joline,' she kind of laughed a little.

And I tried to not smile too big. I was sure I could walk on water.

When we got to her house her older cousin was on the front porch doing something to her fingernails. Ruthann's aunt sent her over sometimes to help out Ruthann by doing the wash and such while her brother was at work.

I sat on the front steps and waited.

'Don't ya'll know how to speak?' her cousin asked.

'Well, Good Afternoon Miss Snooty Booty. My aren't we having a pleasant day?' Ruthann sassed after her before rolling her eyes and going inside.

'Afternoon.' I turned my head and nodded.

'Good afternoon,' she said, still shaking her head after Ruthann. She blew on her nails, got up and went into the house.

I looked around and all the other porches were empty of people at that moment. All the different color flowers in the yard down the street caught my eye. Reds and oranges, purples and greens – petals moving like proud whispers in the yellowing afternoon light. I was about to go pick some for Ruthann when she came back with two glasses of lemonade.

We sat and drank for a while in silence. Then she asked me what I did all the time. I told her that mostly I like to climb trees and to read. She asked me what was my favorite book. I thought about Big Mama's bookshelves stretching up to the ceiling and came up with Langston Hughes and Nella Larsen. Before I knew I'd picked one, I told her it was a book called *Quicksand* by Nella Larsen.

I wasn't sure why I picked that one. I'd had to use the dictionary a lot but what I did understand of it felt kin to how I felt sometimes. I told her that I would sneak it out of Big Mama's so she could read it. She seemed pleased to hear it so I smiled too.

'Give me your glass,' she said, ending the conversating.

I drank down the rest of my lemonade and handed her the glass. She took it and our books and went back in the house.

When she came back out, she walked right past me down the steps and was half-way out of the yard when she turned around saying 'Well, come on, Joline.'

I'd still been thinking on why I chose Larsen over Hughes. I hopped up and went to her side. We started walking up towards Taylor Street.

'How come you call me Joline when everybody else calls me Jr?' I asked her.

'Because every one else calls you Jr and besides, I like Joline.'

'Hmph' was all I could say back.

We went into Mr Henderson's place and took a booth by the window.

'Here you are ladies.' Mr Henderson brought the bubbly drinks over to us himself. The light coming through the window and the gold teeth revealed by his smile brought out the sparkles in his silver hair.

'Thank you.'

We each got an orange-Pepsi mix. I could've made it at home but drinking it out of a big glass with a straw with the juke box in the background and Ruthann across the table made it special. The place was crowded and loud with life. People had on clothes of all different colors with matching shoes and pocketbooks. They had stories of all different kinds with matching songs and laughter. I was used to gatherings of folks but this was not the same. The people here were colored too but they were young and colored and the air even though it was thick with grease and perfumes, seemed lighter like playing with a balloon instead of a kickball.

As we drank our sodas we sat there talking, laughing, bouncing in our seats and playing songs. The excitement of feeling grown made us giggly girls.

For a minute, I lost myself in Ruthann. She was talking to me but I didn't hear a thing she was saying. I was too busy marvelling at how perfect she was. There was nothing wrong or even ordinary about Ruthann. Her redbrown skin, just a little darker than her daddy's, and big dark brown eyes. She looked solid like the girls who took P.E. Sometimes I think she wanted to be hard in attitude like Marla and them at school, but she just couldn't be like that all the time.

Two white boys pulled up to the corner outside and gave Sweetman some money. They stayed for a little bit then got on back in their car and went on about their business.

'I know Big Mama says we're going to go to school with them soon.'

'No I ain't.' Ruthann sounded like she knew better.

'Why not?'

'My daddy says they ain't no good for us and besides I just know I ain't going to school with no crackers.'

'Why does he think they're all so bad? Look at Miss Sarah. She hasn't done wrong by us. She's just as nice as the rest of the girls.' I took a swig of my soda and waited for her to answer. Her head was down. A part ran straight down the middle of her head and sloped towards her back out of my vision. She shook it side to side.

'You really think Miss Sarah is the cat's pajamas don't you?'

Why shouldn't I?

'Big Mama says there's good and bad of every kind.'

'I don't know. Why do you ask so many questions?' She sucked down the bottom of her soda, making that loud noise sounding like a big old belch.

'I got to go fix dinner before my daddy gets home.' She started sliding out of the red and white booth. 'He gets real mad if it ain't ready soon after he's home.'

I was crushed that the moment was ending. All of our songs hadn't played. I wanted to hear the Charlie Jordan song about the 'Cocacoly and lemon sody' but I didn't think that would convince her to stay.

I paid for our drinks and we left shortly after that. I squeezed my hands into anxious fists and shoved them deep in my pockets. We had only taken a few steps when we

passed one of Ruthann's classmates kissing on some boy in his car at the entrance to the alley. We stopped and watched.

'See, that just doesn't look like fun to me,' I said in a hushed voice.

'Well, it is.' Ruthann raised an eyebrow and smiled a little to herself.

I wrinkled my nose like I had smelled something nasty, unsure of whether or not I should believe her.

'You kissed somebody before?' My palms were suddenly itchy and moist, I clenched my hands tighter.

She pulled me by the elbow into a doorway in the alley. 'Come on. I'll show you.'

She didn't wait for me to say OK although I would have. She put her face up to mine and I thought I would fall out right there on the ground on account of my nervous state. She kissed me just a little bit longer than a peck. But then she kissed me again. I stared at her eyelids for a bit. I was frozen. Then I figured I should close my eyes too and I squeezed them shut.

'You gotta open your mouth a little bit.' She directed me. I did and her tongue started moving around in my mouth. It felt real strange but I must say I kind of liked it. We was kissing like I seen Miss Lila kiss a customer before – Mr Taylor. She told me one time that Mr Taylor was the only one she'd kiss.

We kept on doing that for a while then she pushed me off of her.

'I got to go before my daddy gets mad at me.'

I walked her back home, stealing kisses in the alley's shadows until we got close to our houses and she made me stop.

'Aw, man. You really got to go?'

'Girl,' she laughed, 'I'll be around all summer and I'm not moving or anything, child, at least not yet, so I'll still live around the corner.'

'What do you mean, "not yet"? ' She hadn't said anything to me about moving and neither had Chucky.

'You know. When I go to the big city and become a star.' She switched to movie star and threw her hand in the air posing and smiling for an imaginary camera. Her behind moved from side to side as she made her way down the street.

I laughed and played like I was taking her picture.

1970s Lesbian Feminism Meets 1990s Butch–Femme

JUDITH ROOF

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new generation of young lesbians, influenced by the women's movement, rejected butch–femme as a heterosexist imitation of the oppressive gender roles of patriarchy. In a philosophical system that depended upon fixed gender oppositions and emphasized the positive values of the women's culture, 'woman-identified woman', and the egalitarianism, openness, and political purity of lesbian relations, butch–femme became one practice lesbian feminism 'liberated' itself from.¹ But in attaching itself to a reified gender category as a political, aesthetic, and social necessity, this lesbian feminism would also mark itself as another stage in history. If it rejected the oppressive patterns of heterosexual relations, it overvalued a gender essentialism that in the end only reified the very system it wished to critique. While championing women was at the time a necessary political tactic that resulted in at least some social and political gains by women, the lesbian feminism of the 1970s also was limited by the idea of the truth of binary gender which would lead only as far as separatism and equal rights. With late 1980s and 1990s challenges to the stability and naturalness of gender systems as well as increasing attention to other kinds of oppressive differences (race, ethnicity, class, age), lesbian feminism as it was conceived in the 1970s began to lose gender as the certain terrain of political interest and analysis. Reified gender itself became a trap as the possibilities of gender instability represented by the emergence of lesbian S/M, transgender, and transsexuality, though less overtly political in 1970s terms, offered a more complex analysis, aesthetic, and erotics to a community whose political zeal had locked its adherents into a species of puritanical sexual policing. By the 1990s butch–femme is back, this time as a political possibility.

In 'Confessions of a Pseudo-Male Chauvinist' published in *The Ladder* between 1968 and 1972, Martha Shelley confides: 'I didn't really like women. In bed, yes – but all my friends were men. In rejecting the woman's role, from knitting to cooking to wearing mascara, I had also rejected women . . . I snobbishly (and self-destructively) treated women as sex objects and men as intellectual companions. In short, I was a pseudo male chauvinist' (Shelley, 1976a, p. 93). Later in her essay, Shelley acknowledges that 'Many educated and/or butch-type women behave just as I did . . . Many butch-types of my acquaintance – including myself – have expected their lovers to behave as housewives; in other words, we have oppressed other women in the same way that men oppress straight women' (*ibid.*, p. 97). Shelley maintains that while identification with masculine roles gains little for male-identified women, their male-identification may make them guilty of perpetuating sexist oppression against other women. Shelley's conflation of masculinity, maleness, butchness, and oppressive power is typical of lesbian feminist analyses of sex/gender oppression during this era of incipient large-scale lesbian feminist

activism. Such an analysis was part of the process of working through a recognition of the larger interconnections among power, gender, and sexuality that have grounded much feminist thought about rape, pornography, and the utopian politics of ideal woman-to-woman relations. But assuming that all forms of masculinity and sexist oppression are the same works against butchness itself as well as against butch-femme relations which came to be seen by a significant portion of the younger lesbian feminist population of the time as imitating the oppressions of heterosexual forms.

The late-1960s kibosh on butch-femme practices seems the obvious result of assuming a static and essentialist notion of gender as well as seeing the smallest instance of oppression as necessarily reflecting – and possibly engendering – larger patterns of oppression through culture. As Linda Phelps, another *Ladder* contributor observed, 'Kate Millett showed us in *Sexual Politics* that fascism – the relations of dominance and submission that begin with sex and extend throughout our society – is at the very core of our cultural experience' (Phelps, 1976, p. 169). And because dominance and submission in sexual relations was seen as a central gendered instance of oppression, sexual practice became one site for an imagined shift in power relations that might also permeate and alter the larger culture.

The rhetoric through which lesbian feminists identified themselves as a largely political movement fighting against sexist oppression does focus on gender and sexuality; 1960s arguments about the relation between sex and gender assumed an underlying model wherein the gender of participants defined the nature and character of sexual practice. Women with women were necessarily lesbian while male/female couples were perforce straight. Since all things that were masculine were evil and all things that were feminine were good, sex between a man and a woman could only enact an oppressive situation, while sex between two women necessarily tapped into such positive womanist traits as gentleness, warmth, kindness, equality, decenteredness, non-goal-orientation, and a total absence of dominant/submissive formations. 'Real' lesbian sex, hence, was woman-to-woman sex and any practice that marked itself in any way as a relation of dominant and submissive (which would include any relation of masculine and feminine, sado-masochism, or sexual activities such as tribadism or penetration that seemed to imitate heterosexual practice) were perceived as reproducing the oppressive relations of patriarchy. Sexuality and its politically 'pure' manifestations became a form of political action as well as a mode of resistance.

Lesbian feminism, however, was more than the extremely personal made political. 'Lesbian-feminism' as Charlotte Bunch asserts, 'is far more than civil rights for queers or lesbian communities and culture. It is a political perspective on a crucial aspect of male supremacy – heterosexism, the ideological and institutional domination of heterosexuality' (Bunch, 1994, p. 436). Claims such as Bunch's were necessary in the late 1960s to create and justify the specific political category of the lesbian whose oppression, because its basis was apparently both gender and a 'voluntary' sexual practice, seemed more difficult to articulate and less worthy of passionate defence. The same connections among sex, gender, and oppression also served to promote the virtues of lesbian feminism as a form of political activism, providing yet another rationale for the existence of lesbian feminism and situating it as the vanguard of feminist movements. This last claim was necessary as a strategy to defend against the overt homophobia of such groups as NOW which in the late 1960s and early 1970s struggled publicly with the 'lavender menace'.² In the larger context of national feminist struggles, butch-femme

had to disappear, given its apparent participation in the patterns of heterosexual domination feminism inveighed against.

Butch-femme, thus, vanishes as a possibility in lesbian-feminist thought, since there was no way to comprehend it as anything other than an imitation of heterosexuality as the central form of sex/gender oppression. In their pioneering book *Lesbian/Woman* (1972), Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon rarely mention butch-femme, discussing it as a choice that often reflected the limited imaginations of those who identified in such a fashion. For them, butch-femme resulted from a lack of models apart from heterosexual marriage; they characterize the use of dildos and other more potentially sex-role fulfilling practices as beyond the knowledge and experience of most lesbians who prefer to use such gender-neutral items as carrots and candles if they desire penetration at all. Openly butch-femme identifications or behaviours were viewed as regressive, anti-political practices which disrupted the elegant equation between proper lesbian sexual practice and the purity of lesbian feminism's neat alignments among sexual practice, political philosophy, and the valorized image of the pre-patriarchal woman. Butch women were euphemized in such neutral adjectives as 'big', 'strong', or 'independent', or as women who rejected the highly impractical feminized appearance demanded by patriarchy. And butch-femme does disappear from the pages of most lesbian-feminist writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Shelley's mention of the 'butch-type' woman is the only such reference in the entire collection of *Ladder* essays. Other primers of the time – Jill Johnston's *Lesbian Nation* (1973), Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love's *Sappho Was a Right-on Woman* (1972), and Rita Laporte Brown's and Charlotte Bunch's various 1970s political essays – rarely if ever mention butch-femme practices, and they are seldom evoked in Karla Jay and Allen Young's 1978 retrospective collection *Lavender Culture*.

One of the *Ladder* essay, however, rather clearly delineates the issues around what Rita Laporte calls the 'butch-femme controversy'. Noting that butch-femme is largely understood as 'aping' heterosexuality, Laporte calls for the separation of 'female from feminine and male from masculine' (Laporte, 1992, p. 210). Anticipating a later, more generalized acknowledgement of the necessary detachment of gender and sexuality, Laporte tries to balance what she understands as the patriarchal valences attached to masculinity and femininity with what she sees as the terms' 'real, relational meaning' (*ibid.*, p. 210). While masculinity and femininity are cultural stereotypes, they also 'refer to qualities that exert a mutual attraction, analogous to the attraction between the north and south poles of magnets' (*ibid.*). Understanding butch and femme as poles of attraction that are in some way linked to cultural conceptions of masculinity and femininity (but not male/female), Laporte sees women's expression of a range of gendered traits as natural; suggesting that lesbians find their own truth, she suggests that lesbian butch-femme practice is a useful model for a more egalitarian heterosexuality. Laporte's underlying argument, however, is to remove butch-femme from the political effects of its confusion with heterosexual patterns of dominance and submission. And in this she cannily locates the kernel of the logic by which 1970s lesbian feminism suppresses butch-femme and by which butch-femme returns as a visible alternative only in the early 1990s when critics finally and more firmly disentangle sex from gender.

In its status as a political (and hence personal) no-no, butch-femme disappears from political consideration, though not from actual practice where it continues in disguised forms among lesbian feminists and more openly among less 'politically' aware populations. Its interplay of difference, however, is symptomatically displaced into another

locus in lesbian-feminist writing. The rather simple logic by which butch-femme is excised from lesbian feminist practice of the late 1960s and early 1970s accompanies lesbian-feminist writers' use of race as both a model for oppressive relations and an analogy through which to define the political character of lesbians as a deserving minority. In 'Pseudo-Male', for example, Shelley slides from admiration of "'masculine" women' to including herself as a 'butch-type woman'; her primary analogy for the butch-type's infelicitous (and unprofitable) sexism is race. She compares male-identified butch-types to Uncle Toms; the political stakes of such male identification are like the dubious advantages of African-Americans who identify with whites and sell out other African-Americans.

Shelley's evocation of a racial model is only one (but a very instructive) instance of the curiously insistent rhetorical use of the example of racial oppression as a way to define and make serious lesbian feminism's political agenda. The evocation of race implants a productive comparison of irrefutable political value in the place of the sexual differences represented by butch-femme practices which had been so prominent a part of lesbian existence. Implying an analogy between maleness and whiteness, Shelley aligns categories of oppressive dominance and thereby situates lesbian as a womanist category as similar to racially oppressed African-Americans. This comparison benefits lesbian feminists by locating them within the field of identifiable oppression, but it also tends to mask feminism's residual racism which is itself marked by its easy appropriation of race as an analogy. This racism is most evident in some of the era's more virulent rhetoric. Barbara Grier, for example, notes somewhat inelegantly that 'Just because we cannot march in the streets screaming that rats are eating our babies doesn't mean we don't have as vicious a prejudice directed against us. Want to get your head shot off in any big city? Just run into the streets around dusk screaming about "niggers" and see what happens. But run into the same streets shouting "Down with queers" and you can raise a mob to back you' (Grier, 1976, p. 32). Grier's panegyric is full of ambivalence and resentment, reflecting almost a sibling rivalry among modes of oppression; nonetheless, her rhetorical comparison is typical of attempts to certify lesbian feminism as a deserving minority.

The emergence of the model of racial oppression in lesbian-feminist writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s was not only compelled by the need to establish lesbian feminism as a bona fide oppressed group, but appeared specifically as an injunction against the self-defeating political impurities imported by such manifestations of masculinity or heterosexuality as butch-femme, marriage, and power tripping. Race provided the example of a positive movement with clear aims that operated within an obviously racist world. The utter ineluctability of the racial model not only imported seriousness through association, but also demonstrated the virtues of consistency and the socio-political dangers of consorting with the enemy. At the same time, race occupied the site of difference within lesbian-feminist movements whose appeal to a fairly homogenized notion of womanhood threatened both an inaccurate estimation of the lesbian-feminist population and boredom.

This is not to say that the lesbian feminism of this era saw sexual difference among women in terms of racial differences; rather that lesbian feminism strove for analogy and similarity among women as ways of uniting lesbians against patriarchy, heterosexuality, and bad male characteristics. This is not surprising if gender, as the locus of essentialized traits, is the definitive category for political analysis and if lesbianism is understood as

a particularly pure manifestation of the counter-patriarchal virtues of the female gender. Gender/sexuality becomes a primary identity analogous to other minority identities; an identity politics is born that in its self-definition as a particular kind of gender manifestation, sees consistency of identity within a series of separate but analogous identities as the first step to political enfranchisement. 'Women hate both themselves and other women', the Radicalesbians wrote in 1970. 'They try to escape by identifying with the oppressor, living through him, gaining status and identity from his ego, his power, his accomplishments. And by not identifying with other "empty vessels" like themselves, women resist relating on all levels to other women who will reflect their own oppression, their own secondary status, their own self-hate' (Radicalesbians, 1992, p. 176). Revolutionary action comes from the identificatory bonding of women – all women – in a vision of amazing homogeneity: 'Only women can give each other a new sense of self. That identity we have to develop with reference to ourselves, and not in relation to men. This consciousness is a revolutionary force from which all else will follow, for ours is an organic revolution' (*ibid.*). Organicism requires the denial of alternate identifications; likeness and similarity become the necessary hallmarks of political change.

This need for both homogeneity and analogy is evident in lesbian-feminist appeals to a civil rights analogy, where, for example, Martha Shelley might equate lesbianism with racial or ethnic oppression ('I have heard many women say, "I'm proud to be a lesbian!" in the same way that a Negro, a Jew, or any other member of an oppressed minority group might be proud in her heritage' (Shelley, 1976b, p. 36)). The equation of sexual and racial oppression enabled what seemed to be a one-sided alliance, if not collapse into one another of race and sexuality in the case of African-American lesbians. Because the oppression of lesbians was like the oppression of African-Americans, African-American lesbians logically came within the aegis of a lesbian feminism that was positioned in the same oppressive locus as race. If the primary 'mode' of oppression for all women is patriarchy and if lesbians are like blacks, then the mode of oppression for all lesbians, regardless of race, is patriarchal heterosexuality. Lesbian women of colour, therefore, owed their first allegiance to the worst oppression. But of course this did not mean that white lesbian feminists were not also racists; in fact, this attitude illustrates exactly the extent to which they were racists, for in denying the difference and importance of racial politics, lesbian feminism was able to subordinate racial oppression to patriarchal oppression by arguing that sexism is more pervasive than racism. Thus, it was possible for Anita Cornwell, one of the few black lesbian feminists publishing essays in a predominantly white feminist media during this era, both to point out the male supremacy of racial movements in 'Open Letter to a Black Sister' and to analyse the racism she found in the women's movement. In the middle of her analysis of white feminist racism in 'Three for the Price of One: Notes from a Gay Black Feminist', Cornwell launches into a description of her experience with a group of black lesbians who had not had the opportunity to be made politically aware through the women's movement. The unfortunate effect of racism in the women's movement for black lesbians, according to Cornwell, is that 'unless they have come across feminist ideas from somewhere, they are apt to remain in the old rut of sexual role-playing that apparently affects all traditional lesbian circles' (Cornwell, 1994, p. 471).

Detailing how she was mistaken for a butch, Cornwell describes her encounter with a black lesbian friend who classified her as a 'stud', a denomination Cornwell did not identify with since she was a 'womin' (*ibid.*, p. 472). The exchange Cornwell suggests

between the lesbian feminist enlightenment that would enable black lesbians to escape their 'old rut' and the lesbian-feminist racism that prevents black lesbians from acquiring such enlightenment is symptomatically located in butch-femme. If butch-femme is displaced by racial analogies in white lesbian-feminist writing, then it stands for the effects of racism in Cornwell's accounts.

But what really is at stake in the trade-off between racial difference and butch-femme? For white lesbian feminists butch-femme is left behind in an appeal to a more liberal (and liberated) vision of social equality that includes and in fact aggressively employs ideals of racial equality. For Cornwell, butch-femme among black lesbians is the result of the very unliberated and unsisterly biases of white lesbian feminists. For both, butch-femme represents the alternative to a positive racial consciousness; it is the relic of a lack of consciousness and political progress. An acceptance of racial difference (even one as appropriative as early lesbian-feminist analogies) signifies the rejection of oppressive gender roles. This would seem to suggest that white lesbian-feminist thought had opened itself in whatever limited way to other differences as it rejected ossified gender norms and oppressive racial and ethnic stereotypes.

The primary mode of such white lesbian-feminist championing of racial equality was, however, the insistent analogy between lesbian and black that turned into a form of assimilation. Appeals to racial equality were not about embracing differences, but rather about making all differences the same, encompassing racial minorities within a larger lesbian-feminist battle against patriarchy. The effect was to make gender, sexual, racial, and ethnic differences disappear in the service of a homogenized vision of lesbian feminism that appealed primarily to gender identification – and specifically to the 'woman-identified woman' as the main basis for political action. In this context, then, evocations of race are not the substitution of one kind of difference – butch-femme – for another – racial difference, but rather the elimination of sexual difference in favour of racial assimilation. Under the banner of woman identification, racial difference disappears as an operative difference, enabling the production of a homogeneous gendered field of no difference seen as a revolutionizing force.

But racial difference does not disappear; rather it returns insistently as the first significant point of contention within lesbian-feminist movements and certainly within the fledgling practices of women's studies and feminist literary scholarship. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, black lesbian-feminist critics and activists such as Barbara Smith, Gloria Hull, and Wilmette Brown as well as white lesbian critics such as Ellie Bulkin point out again the marginal and invisible status of the black lesbian. Smith's 1977 essay 'Toward a Black Feminist Criticism' in particular became a central tract in mainstream feminist literary criticism, arguing for the joint recognition of gender, race, and sexuality, and putting these terms to work in an influential reading of Toni Morrison's *Sula*. Smith's essay was reprinted several times as the specimen piece of black feminist literary criticism, coming to stand as both token and challenge to a mainly white women's movement.

The canonization of Smith's essay occurred through the 1980s at the same time that Bonnie Zimmerman's 'token' lesbian essay 'What Has Never Been' was also repeatedly included in collections of feminist criticism. The inclusion of black lesbian-feminist work and lesbian work together (and in most cases literally beside one another) demonstrates the ways black and lesbian were perceived by straight white feminists as different and competing differences. Both marginalized even in their centralizing inclusions, black

lesbian-feminist and lesbian are co-equal alternative brands, terms in a list of differences from white feminist practice.³ But black or white, the lesbianism comprehended by these works is a womanist practice that itself betrays no sexual difference. Again racial differences stand for all differences not only among women, but among lesbians.

In the second half of the 1980s, the emphasis on the multiple racial, ethnic, class, and sexual differences that break up homogenized feminism was also present in the burgeoning scholarship in lesbian studies itself. In 1988 Jewelle Gomez published 'Imagine a Lesbian . . . a Black Lesbian. . .' in which she reviews the history of Smith's essay, notes the continuing difficulties in publishing black lesbian material, and questions the racism of academic norms. Many feminist critics acknowledge the difference race makes, inaugurating an era in which identity politics and standpoint epistemologies make certain that racial and sexual differences become visible if not operative parts of feminist analysis. Once racial differences are acknowledged as producing real and viable differences among lesbians, the door is open for a reconception of lesbian politics that no longer insists on homogeneity as a political requisite, but rather on an acknowledgement of differences as a political necessity.

Even as feminist theory embraces differences so that the predictable list – race, class, ethnic origin, religion, age, sexual preference – constitutes a litany, all of these become in themselves identity categories that present a different kind of ossification. These differences for a time become the only recognizable and politically useful differences; it is no accident that apart from class, they tend to populate legislated lists of impermissible discriminations where, of course, sexual preference suffers the most vexed inclusion (and more often exclusion). Gender differences do not penetrate this list, even though the list is predicated upon gender difference as a primary mode of discrimination and differentiation. In the latter half of the 1980s, gender differences among women were still not comprehended.

Even so, the acknowledgement of multiple, coexisting differences sets the stage for the critical re-entry of butch-femme. If a homogeneous gender can be characterized by so many differences, then certainly those differences can be characterized by gender and sexual difference. In an acknowledgement of the possibility of difference, repressed differences such as butch-femme can re-emerge. However, it takes more than an atmosphere of multiple differences to enable the reappearance of butch-femme. Given the problematic logic by which biological sex and gender were collapsed in the late 1960s and early 1970s – a logic which required the disappearance of butch-femme – it is only with the systematic and highly visible rethinking of the relation between sex and gender that butch-femme can return as a viable lesbian practice instead of as a sell-out non-difference. While there were always feminist thinkers who recognized the distinction between sex and gender, it was not until the publication of Judith Butler's influential *Gender Trouble* (1990) that this distinction became widely acknowledged. In pointing out not only the constructed nature of a dualistic biological sex, but the way genders are constantly produced as performatives rather than as emanating naturally from biological sex, Butler succeeds in separating the two terms that made butch-femme a political impossibility. In addition, her emphasis on gender performativity (often misunderstood as gender performance) drew attention to the possibilities of gender play as itself a political and erotic option.

Butler's book came at the right time. In the late 1980s readers were already suspicious of essentialism and there was at the same time a tactical, conceptual shift

in nomenclature from lesbian to queer: *Gender Trouble* was taken, at least by some, as a theory that underwrote a practice of troubling gender through an often misconstrued notion of gender *performance* instead of performativity. Popular texts (at least for academic critics) such as Sandra Bernhard's film *Without YOU I'm Nothing* (1990) or Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) play with and through issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality whose relative interrelations and the political meaning of their renditions will fuel a rather insistent scholarly debate. In a field of sex/gender studies that had already become fascinated with cross-dressing (even if some of its incipient fascinations, such as Elaine Showalter's 'Critical Cross-dressing' (1987), reiterate the same notion of masculine impurity and appropriation as early castigations of butch-femme), gender performance, seen either as transvestism or as butch-femme, becomes the next logical step for critical fascination.

This interest in performance/performativity is in part due also to different conceptions of political praxis that emerged in the 1980s. No longer is social inequality conceived of as an oppressor/oppressed opposition; rather, emerging recognitions of the effects of commodity culture and more postmodernist understandings of institutions and the possibilities of knowledge shift political tactics from a model of identity oppression where moral force must counter social force to strategies of play, performance, in-your-face revelation, and the reaffirmation that sex and gender are not as aligned as we thought. In fact in the 1980s we begin to recognize that the alignment of sex and gender has underwritten both oppression and lesbian politics.

Some of this shift in tactics is also due to differing conceptions of the operations of power. If dominant culture is perceived as having all the power to define and oppress, then purity of category as in lesbian feminism makes sense. But if power is perceived as a more dispersed and varied formation linked to disseminations of knowledge and technologies of control in a more Foucauldian analysis, then there is no central assailable locus of power located primarily in dominant culture, and categorical purity becomes less a political necessity and more an exercise of oppressive power itself. If power is dispersed, then instances of oppression can be addressed in terms defined by the instance; parody, performance, and perversions of dominant formations become more viable modes of countering dominant discourses of gender and sexuality.

The shift to queer invites a reconsideration of the butch, but such a change is rather more an effect of nostalgia and a re-sorting of gender possibilities than any essential opening provided by the admittedly commodified rubric of queer. While 'the sex-positive and anti-assimilationist' rubric 'queer' might 'claim', as Sue-Ellen Case suggests, 'to cut across differences: bisexuals, transgendered people, s/m practitioners' and while 'all the "antinormal" could be included in its embrace, and . . . it also claims multicultural representation at its base', it also seems to level and even eliminate those differences from any consideration of the meaningful material dissimilarities (gender, class, ethnicity) that mark a political reality on different fronts (Case, 1997, p. 217). Queer itself seems to have been a market ploy, reflecting a need to catch media attention, but also an individualism and infinite splitting that made group political action itself difficult. In this context, performance becomes one of the only ways to conceive of resistance, since it could be done by individuals and was in fact geared at the media.

Rehabilitating the butch as a nostalgic figure of 1970s anti-assimilationist feminist power, Sue-Ellen Case tracks 'queer' as a 1970s lesbian-feminist tactic of being monstrous: 'The tradition of anti-assimilationism, then, could be perceived as emanating

from a 1970s working-class butch feminism, rather than a late 1980s New York queer coalition' (*ibid.*, p. 207). This monstrousness is expressed by the performance and figuration of an in-your-face 'camp irony', according to Case, and operates on the principles of a purified feminist consciousness, one that has taken back the dyke – and especially the butch version of that as itself intrinsically campily ironic.

In this context butch-femme becomes a political practice whose public acknowledgement of sex/gender splits as well as the public revelation of a kind of erotic play work against dominant formations of heterosexuality as examples of its successful perversion. Aided by a commodity culture that renders style itself a commodity, butch-femme becomes an all-too-visible possibility. The level of commodity style, however, while making 'gender bending' a stylish prospect, also renders (and trivializes) a very material practice as style only. Against commodity cultural appropriations, then, butch-femme as lived becomes a potentially threatening presence, reminding everyone that sex/gender norms are anything but stable and are in the service of patriarchy. For this reason also, butch women are still treated as threatening, both by mainstream culture and by feminists who still see such expressions of gender complementarity as regressive and politically problematic.

In the complex constellation of queer non-differences, race becomes, like most postmodern positions in this queer register, a matter of performance. Sandra Bernhard's *Without YOU I'm Nothing* becomes the signal text in the analysis of the relations among queer gender/sexuality and race.⁴ Emblematic of a postmodern queer attitude of campy irony, self-reflexivity, and performance, Bernhard's film spurs a tradition of commentaries around issues of sexual and racial identity, the effects of performance, and the lesbian positive or lesbophobic aspects of her self-situation as the white Jewish performer before a black audience. While Bernhard does not get close to any butchiness, her play with race and sexuality seems to enact a political interchangeability even as her stagey efforts reveal how non-interchangeable these differences still might be. No longer substituting for butch-femme, race becomes a manifestation of the same performative impetus, equated with the butch rather than eliminating her. The interracial lesbian couple becomes an alternative to the butch-femme couple where both versions image what might still be perceived as complementary oppositions, but within a new 1990s world of liberated variety.

It is still difficult for those lesbian feminists who came out in the late 1960s and 1970s to understand the appeal of butch-femme, accustomed as many are to the insistent alignment of sex and gender. But the visibility of younger lesbians for whom butch-femme is not such an anathema provides a new and different model of queer politics, whose object is no longer so much the correction of gender oppression, as the enlargement of political freedoms in relation to personal choices. While in 1970s terms this may seem somewhat individualistic and apolitical, its focus seems to be more on a complete separation of sex, gender, and privilege rather than on the equalizing of privileges between genders. This opens gender up to a more multiple reading (there are more than two genders), and envisions a very different relation between genders and political possibility.



Case and Friend, San Francisco, 1968

Making Butch: An Historical Memoir of the 1970s

SUE-ELLEN CASE

While watching the film *Last Call at Maud's*, I remembered my first night at Maud's: more, my many nights at Maud's.¹ For Maud's was my first bar, my coming-into-the-life bar, the bar I frequented several nights a week, the bar that centred my obsessive fantasies of a lesbian (under)world – the bar that loomed behind my article 'Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic'.² The film was about another Maud's. In part, it depicted a Maud's that did not exist, since the film was peopled by well-known feminist authors whom I had never seen there, but whose inclusion in the film seemingly added legitimacy to the bar's claim to centrality in the lesbian scene in San Francisco. In part, the film focused on the later Maud's, in which baseball provided some innocent centre around which the drinking, dancing, and cruising could be relegated to more marginal roles. Perhaps all that cheery social playing was partially a result of the feminist clean-up of the lesbian scene. At any rate, Maud's, the oldest women's bar in San Francisco, was my training ground, was the social centre of the lesbian scene in the city, and now is no more.

My first night at Maud's was in the late 1960s. I pushed open its plain black door to discover two rather dimly lit rooms. The long bar occupied the first room. It was illuminated by various neon ads for beers, the warm, orange light from the juke box, and the garish surround of the pinball machine. The other room afforded a central view of the pool table, with its low-hanging lamp and a few tables along the walls. The old butch-femme scene hunkered down at the end of the bar itself, while a few hippie dykes straggled in to sit at the tables. The classical butches still played the pinball machine and occupied the central pool table. The hippie dykes played the juke box (demanding new tunes) and talked endlessly among themselves. Their conversation was not like the anecdotal monologues delivered by the classical butches, after a few beers, but were sometimes drug-inspired, enthusiastic descriptions of altered perception. The two groups regarded one another with suspicion.

It is this shared, but contested gaze that defines the intersection, the historical moment of this memoir. The time when hippie neo-butches encountered the classical ones. At Maud's: where lifestyle politics met ghettoized, closeted behavior; where middle-class drop-outs, students, and sometime professionals met working-class people who had slim, but tenacious hopes of doing better; where the 'sexual revolution' broke the code of serial monogamy; where costume and hallucination affronted sober dress codes and drink. Outside that dark retreat, feminism was constructing other social spaces and the student movement at San Francisco State was wiping the sidewalk with the canon and the exclusionary curriculum that produced 'whiteness' with its every assignment. Inside, a new historical moment was being forged whose legacy of confrontations proceeds down into the contemporary scene.

At the time, I was a grad student in an experimental program at San Francisco State College. The program offered a version of the history of ideas, with young junior professors just out of places like Brandeis University, where Herbert Marcuse was teaching and Angela Davis was studying. Even without the later wisdom of cultural studies programs, studying notions of history by day and standing around in the bar by night did not seem to contradict one another. Student activism encouraged a necessary relationship between the streets and the classroom. Later, in my PhD studies in drama at Berkeley, I completed a course which combined dramatic theory with the practice of directing. I knew, even then, that I was just sublimating my earlier pleasure in books by day and bars by night – text and performance. I continue to do so, perhaps most literally in this piece. This particular combo currently defines the field, where gender dresses up in the glad rags of the performative and lesbian bars go as 'queer' watering holes.

Like many others, I wore long, straight, hippie hair and bell-bottom hip-huggers, but felt I was 'butch' (though I had never heard the term). They were men's pants, after all, with broad leather belts, and hippie men were sporting long hair as well. Nevertheless, I had to depend on the kindness of classical butches in order to learn the ropes of bar culture. They seemed quite obliging – I think it was my long hair. They drove me around in their big American cars, showing me the route of four bars which composed the itinerary of a weekend night. Maud's was both the starting place and the end-point along a route that included two bars in the Mission district and one over on the North Beach side of town. After the bars closed, the hearty might add an after-hours joint (for members only) in the Tenderloin district. Brunches at the boys' bars on Sunday provided an opportunity to see who had gone home with whom, and all that together composed a weekend in the life.

The butch-femme people included 'Whitey' whom some may remember from the film *The Word Is Out* – her parents had her confined to a mental institution for her sexual proclivity. I dated one of her girlfriends, a young innocent from Kansas City, who had met Whitey in the bars in her first two-week discovery of San Francisco and whom Whitey had rescued from the Midwest by arriving at her parents' door in Kansas City to whisk her off on the back of her motorcycle. That young girl later committed suicide. Other femmes I knew also went down: one who had worked in the publishing firm Little, Brown, until she ran off to join a lesbian commune and became addicted to pills; a sex worker (called prostitutes at the time) who had her own 'shop' in her apartment and sold stained glass windows on the side; the beautiful Eileen, the bar server, and Janice Joplin, who (it was said) sometimes frequented the place. Of course, lots of people were dying from drug use in the hippie culture and its environment. So there were mourning rituals in the hippie culture and in the bar culture.

Strangely, among those I knew, it was the femmes who died. These were actually the neo-femmes, who somehow crossed the two cultures. The classic ones did better – they survived. One was called 'the fox' because of her dyed red wig – she waited tables at a hamburger place called Zim's. She might still be there. She had already been there for several years. Some classic butches included 'Red', who once won the pool championship with one hand, having broken her other in a bar fight, and 'Ace', who drove a cab and had lived for years with a beautician, whose teased, dyed hair was truly monumental. I can remember one femme-femme couple, actually. They were both beauticians. No butch-butch couples, though – well, not until the androgynous look came into fashion. Then everyone looked like butches – 'Girl Scout counselors', some of us

called them, who wore plaid shirts and REI pants. They could be camping in a minute. They had their back packs close at hand.

The crowd was almost exclusively 'white', a fact I did not notice at the time, even though, by day, I was involved in the student strike at San Francisco State which broke out over bringing ethnic studies onto campus. I could yell at a cop in riot gear about needing to break the 'white' composition of the campus and then fail to notice its hold in the bars. My semi-closeted student status must have helped to isolate my political critique from my social one. In fact, as I remember, there was little discussion of the student strike in the bar. Of course, I didn't discuss the writings of Marcuse in there either. Somehow, my own working-class upbringing had taught me to confine school words and concerns to the schoolyard. Still, I knew that the 'black' women, as they were then called, hung out over in Oakland at their own bars and the Filipinas hung out in a place out by the Avenues. I don't remember any Latinas. Hippies were also a pretty white bunch, seemingly ignorant of the racist element in their 'new world' of love and understanding. It doesn't seem to be much better today. Oh, *Diva*, for instance, includes that one article on, say, Andrea Stuart, but look at the ads. The 'white' image of the 'queer' or the sex radical pervades the videos and the hair-styles. Or, as one of my students has written, the butches are women depicted as women of colour, but the femmes are white.³ Maybe it's a consequence of the heritage of lifestyle politics. I mean, who has a lifestyle, anyway?

We were beginning to develop a sense of ourselves in representation – we were discovering the obsession with the camera. My friend Lili Lakich, the neon artist, was on the cover of *The Ladder*, for instance, looking all brooding and hot. Judy Grahn, over in Oakland, was writing the poetry and helping to found a women's press and bookstore. Barbara Hammer was making underground films. In 1979, I wrote a play about Maud's called *Jo: A Lesbian History Play*. It was produced at a straight theatre in San Francisco. It wasn't a very good play, but it was a big event, since no such play had ever appeared on a regular stage there. The show was sold out night after night to roaring, screaming, clapping lesbian audiences who loved seeing Maud's depicted on the stage. Fortunately, their catcalls drowned out much of the dialogue. Meanwhile, the reviewer for the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that it 'told us nothing new about being a lesbian'. He presumably had a good 'deep throat'.⁴ Anyway, Meg Christian went to see the play and looked me up later to ask why, in my humorous and alluring depiction of the bars, I had not detailed the alcoholism and drug abuse, which had so challenged her life and which she attributed to the fact that lesbians could only gather in bars. I guess that's why I want to bring it up here.

I, too, when writing out into the straight culture, want to idealize the bars for political purposes. Make them jealous. But writing within the new fashionable context of pro-sex and butch-femme lifestyle politics, I do want to make a point the community, as it was then called, discovered was valuable. Many elements and substances in the bars and bar life are addictive. I, myself, started going out four and five nights a week. I watched lots of people drop out, go on welfare, or gain some kind of disability pay, in order to live their whole lives there. Why not? It was painful to live under the dominating culture. And wearing a damned skirt in an office was confining. There was a dress code at San Francisco State, for example, stating that skirts and hose were required for all female instructors. I had a couple of knit suits that made riding a motor scooter to work rather treacherous. Inside, in the remove of the bar, it seemed like being a waitress, all decked out, and the centre

of dyke attention was a really glamorous job. In my earlier article, 'Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic', I try to undo the class assumptions behind the upward mobility required by groups such as the Daughters of Bilitis. I realize I might be promoting that same attitude now. More to the point, however, is the feeling that the ghetto nature of our social life at that time encouraged us to collapse many of our aspirations and dreams into the mythic landscape of the bar, sometimes to the detriment of our futures.

Drinking accompanied the socializing and for some, that was life-threatening. I have two friends from those days who are still struggling with alcoholism. Eroticizing commodity fetishism, as lifestyle politics will do, is also addictive. It's like Edie Sedgwick said in her book *Edie*, about life in the Warhol factory: after a while, with the drugs, they just spent all their time getting dressed up and ready to go out – eventually they never even made it out the door. The most fun was the dressing up, the make-up, the hair-styles. Saturdays were about getting ready, Saturday night partying and picking up, and Sundays about seeing who had done what with whom. The weekend was gone. So when the feminist movement came up with the idea called 'substance abuse' it didn't seem as prudish and antique as it does now. In fact, it was an eye-opener. The organization called 'sober dykes' was founded with great pride. Most drugs were put away, except for cocaine, which was touted then to be non-addictive. We later found out about that one, too. I'm not promoting an anti-alcohol, anti-drug attitude, nor even a 12-step approach to life. However, for some, the fact that the social life occurred only around alcohol was dangerous – even life-threatening. As corny and middle-class as those early feminist coffee houses appeared to many of us, they at least provided a safer place for some.

During the later 1970s, feminist coffee houses began opening in the city, along with a women's centre, which included a lesbian space. So suddenly there were options for places to gather. If you couldn't afford to be around drinking, but still wanted to meet dykes, you had another possibility. People began exploring social relationships outside of the context of drinking and sexual practice. Anyway, all these discoveries would later suffer their own correction back to the pro-sex perspective. Contradictions create healthy politics, as Mao once said. But it is important to keep in mind that early on in those changing years, bars were still the only places to hang out and sex was the centre of social relations. Addictions abounded and were explored with great gusto and we all kept returning to the magic circle that bounded those rites. In one way, it was a grand time. The imagination that would celebrate myth and ritual could find wonderful dreams in those bars. Yet constructing a ghetto out of choice, as some bars currently do, has a different valence from having no option but the ghetto.

Now, I just want to take this opportunity to excuse myself if I seem to be name-dropping while recounting these times. I do not mean to imply that I was running around with the in-crowd. I enjoyed only a nodding acquaintance with most of the people I want to mention. On the contrary, I was rather shy, leaning/hiding by my favorite pillar near the bar. Hopefully, the name-dropping can serve as another kind of footnote – a different way to cite the community. Esther Newton has said about my 'Toward a butch-femme Aesthetic' that it is not historical, so in this piece I want to display the nature of my evidence. As we now know, however, as constitutive a role as they may play, experience and memory cannot claim much real empirical power. I'd like to think I could take my cue from Audre Lorde's notion of 'a biomythography'. Lorde's invention in *Zami* helps to inform my uncertainty about how much my memory is constructed out of my desire, how much is observation, and how much is reconstructed to make a timely political point.⁵ Of those

possibilities, the mythic nature of the construction is its most authentic component. Memory's maids of honour, nostalgia, mourning, vindicating and celebrating, colour most of what is written here. Anyway, about the name-dropping, the riskiest part of the venture, we spent a lot of time at the bar gossiping about certain well-known names and claiming sightings of them in the scene. That's what I want to report here. Perhaps naming places and people can lend a candour to this report if not the kind of proof the -ologies so admire. Anyway, name-dropping can also recreate the sense that just everyone was seen at Maud's. Herb Caen even included it in his trend-setting column in the *Chronicle* as the 'place where beautiful women meet women'.

Maud's location, about three blocks from Haight Street, influenced the mix of people in the bar. The woman who wrote the book *Going Down on Janice* had opened a kind of sexy, hippie clothing store on Haight and could be seen in the bar on a Friday night. I felt comfortable going into her store to buy the men's clothes. She had the exciting reputation of peeking around the dressing-room curtain when you were undressing. Her butch lover, in full leathers, could be seen riding her Triumph chopper down Haight Street in the early evening. She was one of the few butch images to intrude into the het, hippie flower look. You see, hippies were into strong gender roles, with women baking bread and having babies, while men chopped wood and rolled joints. They didn't mix with the homosexual crowd, but many of the lesbians around that scene emulated some of its practices, such as living in communes. Theirs were as separatist communes, though. People at the bar often moved 'out into the country' for a while, but many returned in a hurry. Some lesbian communes still persist in the south of Oregon. Others were founded in Grass Valley in California and in northern New Mexico. They were the subject of many conversations in the bars. We would pack up our cars and go out there for a week, just to look. The ones in Sonoma County were close enough for the girls to come into town on the weekend and report on their successes with goat grazing and wood chopping. It was exotic. We were interested in flirting with these 'milk maids', as we called them. I was having fantasies out of Restoration comedies. Fop that I would be.

So, anyway, I learned butch in the heat of this cauldron, which was brewing alternative subcultures in San Francisco. A new butch was born then, combining certain characteristics of the classical style with other influences. Because of feminism, cloning was already happening, toning down the masculine stance. Likewise, middle-class and student conventions altered the gestures, in terms of how you held your cigarette, for example, no longer between the thumb and first finger, which was definitely working-class, but more like Virginia Woolf, in that famous smoking photo of hers. Your seated posture was different as well. You might cross your legs and lean forward at the table, rather than hook your big shoes on the rungs of the bar stool and lean back. The volume of speech diminished, no more yelling 'Hey, Red' when your friend entered the bar, while the volume of music rose, with the new electro sounds of the Jefferson Airplane, for instance. Dancing freed up, releasing one from the bondage of partnering – like sexual freedom, the flirtation was opened out into a wider, more flexible space on the dance floor. Finally, walking the walk definitely altered. Although we might have ridden motorcycles (I certainly did) we did not stomp about in our boots. Everyone was wearing boots, after all. If you had shoulders, you didn't need to mark the fact. Feminism made us interested in women and allowed us to be uninterested in men.

While we were butch, an identification with men would have seemed sordid. Many hippie men, with their long hair and soft ways, who were anti-Vietnam activists, running

from the draft, were also trying to put aside the masculine. The idea of a politics around gays in the military would have been strange, indeed, to those against national military forces. Replicating what were perceived as the gestures of power and dominance had no attraction to those concerned with 'equal rights', so to speak. We were 'flower children' who were against all aggression. The Vietnam war made weaponry and hints of violence seem obscene. Hulking about, or strutting one's stuff would have been aggrandizing space and aping dominance. Thus, butch was about giving sexual pleasure, taking pride in a lesbian identification, and being attracted to femmes. We were seeking to be 'gentlemen', in the best sense of the word, if we understood butch to have any referent among men. A sense of gallantry could mark gestures as butch. You know, there was that Brit fashion of puffy sleeves – the courtier style. Listening to the Stones' 'my sweet lady Jane' encouraged fantasies as pages – exquisite ceremonies for butch bottoms.

However, the butch I learned was not acceptable to the classical butches. Sherman, who appears as a character in the novel *Sita*, laughed derisively at my long hair, my silly hippie pants, my flowered shirts, and my 'execrable' taste in music. She had been elected the 'King' of North Beach, in her men's long-sleeved shirts, her tough ways, and her abstract-expressionist painting style. She wore boxer shorts and men's pajamas and was probably 'stone'. We were not. We had been a part of the 'sexual revolution', after all and wanted to experience it all. Sherman told me to just forget it and, by the way, to forget her beautiful girlfriend. I didn't. Some of those femmes liked the new-style butches. For one thing, we could 'pass' when necessary, both in terms of sexual orientation and class manners. For another, we were struggling with some kind of feminist notion of equality and shared practices. But then, Kate Millett agreed with Sherman, telling me, as a butch, I was just missing a certain something – maybe I just wasn't tall enough.

At the other end of the spectrum, the clone thing was around, compromising a too-rigid stance on role-playing. Barbara Hammer's ground-breaking films represented, as sexual and chic, women in bib overalls, in the country. She associated the nude body with 'nature', cutting from scenes of clitoral manipulation to caves, or whatever. Even though some of us called out 'What is that?' in the dark, alternative cinema showings, protesting the vanilla portrayal of sex, we were still somewhat disciplined by these initial lesbian films. Caught somewhere between being too soft for the Shermans and too tough for the Hammers, we forged a style that referred to hippie anti-masculine male fashions, while still distancing ourselves from new feminist representations which would have us dancing in the meadow in our bib overalls.

Some called us 'nelly butches' as a way to accommodate the new style. We took to wearing 1930s men's clothes from the thrift stores, with flowing, Dietrich-type pants and silk bow-ties. Why, we wondered, did butch necessarily mean dressing down, playing baseball, or poker? To be honest, sometimes, when we watched those traditional butch-femme couples waltz around the floor, they resembled our parents, saying the same things, like 'cut your hair' and 'don't listen to that loud, horrible music'. We were alternatively amused and frustrated by the classic rhetoric of serial monogamy: repetitively 'falling in love', 'getting married', and then living with a 'roommate' who, as they loved to insist, 'used to be my lover but we don't sleep together anymore'. This was the signal that they were moving on. It occasioned those bar fights and couple-identified postures. Hippie free love shared a devotion to sexual pleasure with the classic butches and femmes around the bars, but without the thrill of sneaking around. Bar fights just didn't fit with the idea of 'make love not war'. And then, those classic couples seemed so

apolitical, at the time of street demonstrations. They didn't join them. Perhaps it was because they couldn't yet feel comfortable in the streets.

Rather than enjoying tradition, hippie dykes felt themselves part of a modernist movement, I guess you could say, dedicated to creating the new. Whether it was actually new or not, that was the rhetoric of the subculture. Let me remind the reader again that I am here correcting my stance in my first butch-femme article. At that point in the history of writing about lesbian subculture (the mid-1980s), I felt it was important to emphasize the connection with classical butches in the face of feminism's intrusion into the discourse. Now, I sense a certain mythologizing of butch-femme, which is made to serve an anti-feminist stance, which I believe misinterprets certain historical moments in the history of the feminist movement. I have revised my earlier stance at length in a new article, 'Toward a Butch-Feminist Retro-Future', in hopes of retaining the debates within feminism and its dedication to coalitions among women.⁶ Part of the polemic behind this essay is to understand a different reception around issues of 'female masculinity' (now enjoying a privileged status in some critical circles) by historicizing the markers of masculinity at the time of the Vietnam war.

While we're on contested critical terrain, let me return to the much-debated issue of the lesbian relationship to 'camp', which I celebrated in the first article. When I asserted that such a practice was common, I neglected to locate that practice within San Francisco. It probably did not play in, say, Buffalo. In San Francisco, lesbians and gay men did suffer some social intercourse with one another. Perhaps that is how camp came into the lesbian bar discourse. Crowning the King and Queen of North Beach was an annual joint event. The boys' bars hosted some wonderful women entertainers whom the lesbians poured in to ogle. Tapes by the fabulous Ann Weldon circulated in both bars. The drag ball brought the leading queens around in their limos to visit the annual drag party at Maud's. And, as I mentioned before, the boys' bars hosted those Sunday brunches we all attended. Moreover, several of them served cheap dinners on certain nights of the week. We often met our gay friends there early in the evenings before making our way out into our gender-specific clubs. So, the practice of drag and the enjoyment of multiple sexual partners circulated between gay and lesbian bar cultures. Show people were on the fringes of the scene. Some girls who worked as 'exotic dancers', as they preferred to be called, cynically performed flirtations with men on the stages of topless/bottomless clubs. Costumes were playing on the sidewalks of the Haight. Hallucination dis-jointed the 'real'. Some of us had seen not only Barbara Hammer's films, but Andy Warhol's as well. Kenneth Anger was around in the city. His movie, which begins with a big biker putting on his leathers and chains to 'Blue Velvet' was the talk of the town. I talked with him once about trying to do some homosexual version of *Oedipus*. Shortly after that, he jumped, nude, onto the altar of Glide Memorial Church. Meanwhile, back at Maud's, the brutal, clipped discourse of bar butches still circulated among the hippie descriptions of visions and hallucinations. Opening in there, between the clip and the float, in an environment of self-ironic flirtation within an urban homosexual scene, was a space for masquerading thoughts and inverting social codes. Clipped, ironic, playful travesties cast the mantle of camp across the scene. Not the whole scene, of course, but this particular graft of hippie and traditional.

At the same time as this permissive environment held great sway, violent homophobic practices still penetrated the removed spaces of the bars. Paying off the cops at the bar could be seen by anyone who wanted to look over there on party nights. It was still illegal

to dance together in close contact and the local beat cops had to be encouraged not to come around. The raids around election time as 'moral clean-ups' enforced a sense of the frailty of official liberality. One of the bars in Oakland allowed dancing in a back room, where a large red light blinked when the vice cops entered the front door. Everyone flew to their seats. A certain butch badge of daring could be sported by getting '86ed', or thrown out of the bar for a certain period of time. The owners had to be careful about the vice cops, so they would police untoward physical proximity, which we enjoyed in various dark corners. Frighteningly, there were still repeated episodes of male gangs hiding around the corner at the time of the bar's closing ready to gang rape the women who dared to walk down the pavement alone. This happened to two of my friends. We might swagger in the bars, sporting our butch outfits, but we put on a coat and hurriedly got on our bikes out in front, when we left the safety of the bar's confines.

In many ways, a certain sense of 'butch' did not survive this moment. The lesbian feminist movement turned away from role-playing into a privileging of androgyny, or non-gendered, or non-patriarchal, or 'natural' styles, as they insisted. When butch re-emerged out the other side of that betrayal, it did so with a vengeance – so vengeful, in fact, that it associated its demeanour with gay men and the masculine, rather than with styles among women. Daddy boy dykes and F2M associated with men in new, more fleshly ways. The swagger was back. Images of dominance were eroticized. Working-class styles were sported, even though, often, by middle-class butches. Leather harnesses, dildos, and piercings don't exactly suggest the gestures of gallantry, the way page haircuts and puffy sleeves once had done. In those days, I think the gyno-centric (as it was called then in feminist circles) was the magnetic pole of the imaginary, rather than the masculine. The masculine had been contaminated by its proximity to war.

Well, I am not calling for a vote on which is better. Instead, I want to make a different point, to conjecture that it was in the contrast between these two styles that the notion of style itself became visible in the subculture. Before hippies, butch and femme were not perceived as a style, but as 'the way we are'. At this point in history, one might argue, when hippies and butches actually regarded one another across the room, both became aware of a contest of styles. They were on their way to constructing a sense of lesbian 'lifestyles'. Their comparative practices redefined lesbian sexual practice as style and began to construct a sense of a self-conscious lesbian sociality, grounded first in the bars and later, in various kinds of locations. At the same time, because of the poets, the filmmakers, and the dress-shop owners, there arose a sense that there was a style of lesbian self-representation. Lesbians could begin to see themselves in the mirror in a way that only a few novels had provided them before. Now, they were represented in a certain way – partially influenced by the underground cinema practices in women's and gay films at the time, partially by the styles of the subculture itself. Now, by the time 'lesbian style wars', as Arlene Stein called them in her article by the same title, were taking place in the late 1980s, the 1970s had become cast as a pre-style moment.⁷ Although Stein makes some acute observations about the politics of 'lifestyle', she grounds its emergence in the 1980s by reducing the 1970s to what she calls the 'anti-fashion' movement within lesbian feminism. I think this has become a kind of commonplace assumption that I want to adjust here by introducing the hippie butch. At least in the urban centre known as San Francisco, with its Haight-Ashbury hippie culture, its 'Love-Ins', its Fillmore Auditorium, its local groups such as The Jefferson Airplane, its singers such as Joan Baez and Janis Joplin, its anti-war demonstrations, its student

uprisings such as the one at San Francisco State and other events of the late 1960s and the 1970s, more than a strict hairy-legged, overall-wearing lesbian feminist was walking through the bar door. Sure, she was around and she was influential. But the encounter between the classic butch and the hippie butch was perhaps even more prescient in its focus on style, on issues of representing masculinity and sexual desire.

Hippies also presented the subculture with an interest in perception (via hallucination) and in the structuring of internal processes. If you look around now, these elements, although reconfigured, are still recognizably present. The student movement brought these kinds of studies onto the campus. Some people think we got them from importing French psychoanalytic studies. But I think they developed out of a subculture which smoked marijuana and indulged in long monologues about inner processes, or dropped acid and then dealt with the nature of perception, and out of a militant student movement that insisted that the streets, with all their priorities and social exigencies become part of the 'student body'.

Of course, organizing observations around something designated as a historical moment is really only a familiar disguise for a polemic. I think I already copped to that. Every time I see those crowds at Pride parades pushing for gays in the military, with those uniformed colour guards marching by, and those lesbians cheering on Margarethe Cammermeyer in her drive to get her much-deserved promotion in the US Army, I think of those flowered banners that read 'Make love not war!' Cammermeyer served in Vietnam, I believe. Allen Ginsburg recently died, a gay brother who led that ferocious 'hoohm' out in front of the Pentagon, never running from those cops who were restoring order, but standing quietly his anti-war ground, his long, hippie hair just blowing in the winds of war. Those are the issues in their most aggressive form. Watching some styles of butching it up today, though, I find they still carry for me, a one-time hippie butch, the same associations with masculinity I learned then. I can't shake those countercultural images of taking on the feminine as the devalued, unAmerican, anti-militaristic style. An interest in the masculine still smells of Agent Orange.

So, in spite of what the *X Files* advertises, I am ultimately unconvinced, when discussing the lesbian subculture, that 'the truth is out there'. I don't claim any truth in this matter, only my own strong opinions, memories, vindictive parries, and iconoclastic mythologies. I'm trying to replicate my opinions at the time. But intertextuality, as we call it, among all the articles on butch-femme, queer dykes, lesbian history and attendant topics has penetrated my associations. 'Hippie' is thus a position to hold a certain ground in the terrain of lesbian studies. Still, it does serve to correct the misapprehension that 'lesbian feminists' as they are now constructed against stylish queer dykes define the representation of lesbian in the 1970s.



Open (A Vocabulary of Hands) (Cyndra MacDowall, 1994)

Loaves and Fishes

CHERRY SMYTH

When she first laid hands on me,
it wasn't the sex I recalled,
but her palm, instilling sleep
in the deep of my back.

She's made deals in the streets
and it shows in her hand,
rising for a slap, 'Put it here!'

She holds a teacup like a queen,
little finger stiff, due north-west,
elbow high like a flapping wing.
Even the way she closes the fridge has poise.
She steers one-handedly, cruising corners.
The grip must be firm but never tight.
I say she knows women like she knows cars.
She says she wishes she did.

Her hands conduct a staccato,
boasting fat schemes and adventures,
or argue like wind with her hair,
then lilt as a feather falls,
when she blethers, embarrassed.
'No, no, no, no, no' her hands insist
as they coax money from every pocket.
'It's on me', she cries, reckless with chivalry,
hiding her debt-bitten knuckles.

I praise those hands, with scars she's proud of,
on genderfuck forearms.

Their camp elegance says all her body can't
about deep androgyny.

No one questions pretty manicured nails.

Her hands dislike cookers, prefer sinks,
boxes, mechanical tools and my body.

Veins alert, they inspect with the passion
of a mother gorilla, long fingers, Calamine
to my hot soreness. They steady my pulse,
settle down, settle down, curve on my cheek
in the dark like a prayer.

She has the stroke, the pressure, the speed
and the throttle of a perfect cock in her hands,
which shy from the storm they make of my flesh,
teach the word tender.

Her hands say yield and make it sound safe.
They enter me like something holy.

It takes time to interpret the tongue of her hands,
the whispering curl of 'come here',
or the bunch and knot of 'back off',
as they churn cement, hoist bricks,
sludge mortar into cracks,
knife off the excess,
until she's built Jericho
and I have no trumpet.

Once when I'd been away and came back,
her hands had changed,
the palms taut as a sail,
skin thin with hunger,
bones urgent as a newborn bird.
Our clutch was stronger,
as though we'd pierced the tight membrane
beneath the shell,
cracked open the full, round yellow of love.
Terrified, we pass it like an eye
from one to the other,
our touch never so delicate.

How love kindles loss,
like the simple plea of an oboe
trespasses the dry heart.
I am in the sweet, inquisitive poultice
of her hands,
proudly helpless, wanted, given.
She makes loaves and fishes of me.

Hotel Room

CHERRY SMYTH

I didn't care that the lift was pitch
for her lips were light, her tongue a torch,
her hands a search beam under my mac,
that could not shine like our flesh.

London misses her,
that early evening fuck by the naked window.
The eyeful hotel opposite did not stop her
lifting the folds of my skirt,
bare bum above her, toes singing.

I didn't have time to surround her lust,
become its singular, constant source,
nor rifle her unruly suitcase,
for clues to her hopefulness,
her I-don't-give-a-damn nerve,
which may have narrated,
negotiated my way through the dark.

Her plane left at six.
There is nothing to claim, but you know
when she knelt to fasten my underwear,
it was more intimate than licking,
tender and shameless as the mother,
who crouched over a tampon to show her how.

She'd laugh, lines dashing by her mouth,
if I said I'd been feeling old,
just a muscle doing its job,
till she quickened my skin,
made words strike like flints
on that narrow, unmade bed.



Collection of Esther Newton, circa 1947

Alice-Hunting

ESTHER NEWTON

I met Gertrude Stein in 1961, on the cover of a book. Inside were lots of facts and dates and witty sayings of hers but not the one thing I wanted most to know: Was Gertrude Stein a dyke?

So I ran out and found *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, thinking what a nervy idea to write someone else's autobiography, they *must* have been lovers, but it didn't say so any more than the first book had. It was all impersonal and too much about famous men, but there were many, many hints. And the more books and photographs I found the more I thought yes, but it's one thing to think yes and something else to know it.

I didn't know about *Q.E.D.*, the novel in which it's pretty much admitted (not about Alice, who isn't in it, but about Gertrude as the author/heroine). I didn't know about *Q.E.D.* because, as I later found out, Gertrude and Alice had fixed it so I shouldn't know. I didn't know about 'Lifting Belly' and some other poems in which it's poetically admitted because they hadn't yet been published, even though in 1961 Gertrude had already been dead thirteen years. Of course it was the same reason why I needed to know so badly and Gertrude was never admitted – loving women was a shameful secret. So I had to live with the thought it was probably true, but not knowing.

Little by little this idea of being Gertrude began to grow inside my head. It wasn't yet about living in Paris or about writing, but about being accepted as an equal by men within the small select circle, and of living in a happy domesticated couple with heaps of good food. So naturally, the big thing was to find an Alice.

But finding an Alice wasn't easy. At first it wasn't easy because some therapist said I should go out with men, and none of the men were at all like Alice. After several years I'd used up all the men and the therapist too, and was still as gay as ever. Just then I became one of a few women in a fancy graduate school, with lots of small select men who accepted me as an equal, so the time for Alice seemed right. But none of the women I met really deep down wanted to be an Alice. No matter how Alice they seemed, it always turned out that secretly they too wanted to be Gertrude, even if they had never read anything about her. Unbelievable as it sounds, all those Alices I saw wanted to use me as a model for becoming Gertrude themselves. And as they became more Gertrude, I fought with them more and desired them less.

This is because, speaking frankly, Gertrudes have a couple of faults – being bossy and being babies – and they like to be the only bossy baby in the house. While the aspiring Gertrudes – this is how I saw the situation – probably wanted Alices of their own or at least a more neutral sort of person than I was. And as for desire, I wanted to be the one who was doing something to an Alice who wanted something, not the other way around.

However, there was no giving up on this idea of Gertrude and Alice. Certainly I couldn't be Alice myself, and without an Alice I couldn't be Gertrude, which was for me the only way to be gay. And I was gay. So little by little I began to think that the reason why I couldn't find an Alice must be that I wasn't a genius. If only I could be a genius then absolutely Alice must appear. It was 1968.

Just then they showed the feminist protest of the Miss America contest on TV. Nothing had made me so excited since the day I'd first seen Gertrude's photograph, and I joined a consciousness-raising group. The other women had all been in the radical left and they were politically aware. And just as I was desperately longing to be Gertrude, these young women said that class privilege was *wrong*. I had been earning money on my first teaching job and even though I still hadn't found an Alice, I'd been collecting good furniture and other things that I thought a Gertrude sort of person should have in her home. And furthermore, my 'sisters' most definitely didn't believe in 'roles', meaning they were sick of having to cook or having their boyfriends boss them around. They didn't approve of Gertrude and Alice's way of living either, because it seemed to them just like a husband and wife.

Then I met Louise. At first she wore mini-skirts and eye make-up. On our first date we went to see *King Kong* and afterwards Louise did a very funny imitation of Kong smelling Fay Wray's underpants. Because of her long blonde curls and sequined blouses, I never asked what it meant that Louise played King Kong. She could cook very well and made things like avocado and mushroom sandwiches, so I was thrilled and we moved in together.

But as time went on it got more and more mixed up who was really King Kong and who Fay Wray. Louise's hair got shorter and shorter. All the time we were going separately and together to meetings where it was always said that there were no more 'roles', so there was no way to talk about our predicament. It was bad to be a 'heavy' (meaning other people felt small because you were too big) and I was, and if Louise wanted to be King Kong in bed why couldn't I be Alice?

I began to doubt everything except being gay and wrote about all the doubts in a journal. Soon writing got to be more and more on my mind. And the more I liked doing it and having it on my mind, the more I began to feel Gertrude-like as a writer, just as I was rejecting her because what feminist wants to be accepted as an equal by men or be waited on by an Alice in a cosy couple surrounded by a select few? No, I was too Gertrude, that was the trouble. If only I were less Gertrude I would meet someone who was less Alice and this would solve the problem.

Years later I understood I couldn't find an Alice because Alices no longer officially existed, at least not among the intellectuals and professionals. Not among the young feminists I taught in women's studies. So many were trying to be cleaned-up Gertrudes, minus, that is, the arrogance and class advantages. No more Alices – everyone a Gertrude, sort of.

That suited some women. But many were Alices in the closet. They were all afraid of their natures because somehow, Alice had lost her dignity. And all the Fay Wrays were hiding in overalls or gorilla suits, wanting to be swept off their feet anyhow and deny it the next day, or sick with longing. None of them could talk about it because Fay Wray had been censored and Alice was said to have 'false consciousness'.

Alice was the key to it all, inventing a modern Alice, just as I was, partly formed, a modern Gertrude.

Some of the new Alices will fix motorcycles; others will take up deep sea diving or design glamorous clothes for seduction. Some will write books explaining Alices to the world. There will be those who kick ass and name names, and others who will long to garden. But in my version of the story, they'll all be suckers for Gertrudes.



From 'Rosebud' (Sadie Lee and Julie Graham)
(Del LaGrace, 1992)



Laura and Nina, Florence (Del LaGrace, 1993)

Between Butches

JUDITH HALBERSTAM

My title obviously cites Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's seminal work *Between Men*; this essay will attempt to locate lines of affiliation between butches in such a way as to avoid reproducing the fateful triangle of heterosexual male bonding that Sedgwick has described so well.¹ My purpose here is to diversify the model of butch-femme which has been so useful to much queer lesbian work over the past two decades. I would like to explore the responsibility of butches for what has been called 'femme invisibility' and propose a model of scholarship which capitalizes on intergenerational and indeed interdisciplinary lines of intellectual influence between butches. This model will specify moments of personal voice narrative within queer butch discourse as being crucial to theoretical understandings of gender and embodiment. This discussion obviously focuses upon queer academic production but also tries to reckon with the more general implications of femme invisibility and butch bonding.

1 Femme invisibility

I was out one night at my local drag king club and deep into a discussion with a feminine dyke (not necessarily a femme)² about why I favoured butch drag kings over androgynous or femme kings. I tried to explain that I found the celebration of alternative masculinity empowering in the spectacle of a drag king persona layered over a butch identification. The feminine dyke responded with: 'But I am just as masculine as a butch inside.' She continued: 'I feel masculine and I need to express that side of me as much as my feminine side. Just because a drag king happens to be lucky enough to have a masculine build doesn't mean they are a better drag king than me or even more masculine.' Or words to that effect. I found myself angered by this statement and I wanted to know why. Later I realized that the feminine drag king was intimating that butchness was lucky, a privilege, a bonus that she should not be penalized for simply because she was a feminine woman and therefore 'lacked' masculinity. I tried to explain that most of the time, particularly in early years, butch women do not experience their masculinity as a bonus and the fact that it allows them to pull off wearing facial hair more easily than a femme (sometimes) hardly counts as 'lucky'. I want to develop a more satisfying response to the question of how we inhabit our masculinities and how we theorize them; how we pass on information across generations and how we produce knowledge about butch masculinity that neither cancels out femme self-definition nor erases the particular fragilities of butch identification.

Historically, within both queer discourse and conventional histories of gender and sexuality, the terms butch and lesbian have been conflated in such a way as to obscure feminine versions of same sex desire.³ Furthermore, assumptions about the essential

masculinity of the lesbian have resulted in the production of stereotypes of the masculine lesbian, turning her into a site for lesbian disidentification.⁴ Many of us can remember from childhood, for example, the masculine gym teacher or neighbourhood butch who was soundly ridiculed as an object of scorn and pity rather than admired as a strong and self-sufficient woman. But we can probably also think of many demonstrations of lesbian masculinity which merged all too easily with conventional expressions of masculine misogyny. While queer historians have detailed the concerted efforts made by some early lesbian feminists to unseat butch-femme models of desire from the centre of lesbian definitions, the aftermath of what we call the 'sex wars' has resulted in the rich project of reinstating the complexity of butch-femme while allowing for other variations on the theme of lesbian desire. However, in recent times, I have heard grumblings that we have now heard too much about butches and not enough about femmes, or that lesbianism has once again been annexed indisputably to masculinity. This essay will argue that not only have we *not* heard enough about butches, but that we know barely enough about female masculinity to locate its specific relationship to lesbianism. I will argue, possibly unpopularly, for butch solidarity, for butch role models and for an accounting of butch types. I will claim, possibly counterintuitively, that butch-phobia continues to haunt lesbian self-definition and I will ask that we uncouple butch from femme in order to chart the contours of each formation.

While writing two books – one on *Female Masculinity* and one on *Drag Kings* – I have been asked to appear on panels on lesbian gender both in the academy and in more public venues.⁵ At several such panels my presentations on 'female masculinity' have been greeted by questions from the audience about the over-exposure of lesbian masculinity and the comparative under-exposure of lesbian femininity. I have tried in such situations to explain that I believe whole-heartedly in the project of detailing the forms and modes of lesbian femininity but that such a project is quite separate from the one my work engages. I believe that questions about femininity are inevitably posed to those of us working on masculinity because of the historical formation we have called 'butch-femme'. This term presumes, in a way, that the history of one (butch) should be the history of the other (femme) and that to the extent that one is discussed without the other, the historical record is incomplete. But these claims about femme invisibility go much further. Some femmes accuse butches of new versions of sexism, of reproducing a mainstream obsession with masculinity and dismissal of femininity and of conflating, once again, masculinity and lesbian embodiment.

Biddy Martin, in an essay sounding the alarm on 'antifoundationalist celebrations of queerness', comments that queers have been busily celebrating the transgression they associate with cross-gender identification while ignoring the strictures of what might look like conventional femininity. She writes:

I am particularly interested, here, in a resistance to something called 'the feminine', played straight, and in a tendency to assume that when it is not camped up or disavowed, it constitutes a capitulation, a swamp, something maternal and ensnared and ensnaring. Too often anti-determinist accounts that challenge feminist norms depend upon the visible difference represented by cross-gender identification to represent the mobility and differentiation that 'the feminine' or 'the femme' supposedly cannot.⁶

Martin's point here about the assumed transgression of cross-identification and the assumed conventionality of femininity within women vigorously addresses the vexed issue of femme visibility. Martin suggests that too often 'feminine identifications' are 'excluded, undervalued or obscured by cross-gender investments'⁷ and that we have not really explicated the numerous ways in which femmes resist gender conformity. She also points to the ways in which racial difference within many cinematic representations of butch-femme desire may often work to 'secure butch-femme roles' by aligning the femme with whiteness and the butch with blackness. Obviously, Martin's attempt to bring femme desire to light is laudable and incredibly useful for queer formulations of gender; however, the problem with Martin's essay lies in the way she deploys the terms of a butch-femme dynamic. Martin consistently equates the construction of butchness with another almost invisible or at least silent construction of femmeness – hence, if we say butch is radical, she seems to think, then we mean that femme is conservative. If we point to the potentially transgressive nature of cross-gender identification, then we are simultaneously allowing for the non-transgression of gender-appropriate identifications. Martin, in a way, assigns the responsibility for femme invisibility to butches or theorists of butchness and simultaneously takes for granted a kind of transgression-conformity dialectic between butch and femme.

For example, when remarking upon a theoretical tendency to equate butchness with a negative relation to the female body, Martin claims that this formulation of butch embodiment 'suggests that femmes, by contrast to butches, are at least implicitly gender conformist'.⁸ While I see the point here about the elision of problems of femme embodiment, Martin is now in the untenable position of arguing that butch is a privileged gender because of the disjuncture it marks out between embodiment and appropriate gender presentation. She also assumes that conformity is 'bad' and 'transgression' is good. It is surely only within an academic discussion, however, that conformity and transgression can be so thoroughly uprooted from daily experience. While academics may celebrate transgression, the experience of transgression itself is often filled with fear, danger and shame rather than heroic self-satisfaction. Furthermore, conformity is also not a static activity, and for women especially, conformity can easily result in social death, personal destruction and complete invisibility. Returning to butch and femme subject positions then, it makes more sense to notice that the trials and tribulations of butchness are different from the trials and tribulations of femmeness, and while butchness may teeter on the edge of conformity when it becomes a seamless masculinity that can pass as 'male' and partakes in the active structures of misogyny, it lapses into transgression, and all the dangers that accompany transgression, when the pass fails to hold. And femme lines up with gender appropriateness when it merges sufficiently with heterosexual womanhood, but it diverges from such conformity at the moment that a potentially dangerous non-desire for men is revealed.

In other words, the transgressive quality that is claimed for butch identifications within a queer context is most certainly not acknowledged in general, in the world, in public, and Martin's essay clearly addresses itself solely to academic questions about rebellion and assimilation. Martin also shrugs off the centrality of gender dysphoria and gender dysfunction to butchness and thereby ignores the experience of gender discomfort that surely underlies a majority of butch identifications. She writes: 'I would suggest that making gender dysphoria and gender dysfunction too central to butchness constructs butchness in negativity, curiously makes anatomy the ground of identity, and suggests

that femmes by contrast to butches are at least implicitly gender-conformist.⁹ If butch has been theorized as a negative construction which makes anatomy the ground of identity, it is because butch girls are raised to understand their masculinity as a physical liability and a bodily defect. If femme has been theorized as a positive construction, it is because some social rewards do accompany the presentation of appropriate femininity within a female body. By wholly abstracting her discussion from the realm of experience, Martin obscures the social conditions of queer celebrations of gender deviance and she makes butch and femme into mutually constative constructions.¹⁰

Concerns about femme invisibility must be taken very seriously and charges of butch sexism are definitely worth investigating. Indeed the best way to begin the work of bringing femme to visibility is to engage in projects which record this specific lesbian gender and its specific desires and practices. It is not worth lamenting over and over that this work is not being done or that butches or theorists of butchness are not doing it; for those who fear femme erasure, there is plenty of work waiting to be done. And, of course, many already have begun to do it. Lisa Duggan and Kathleen McHugh have bravely and humorously published their 'Fem(me)inist Manifesto' and they handily define the fem(me) as follows:

Refusing the fate of Girl-by-Nature, the fem(me) is Girl-by-Choice. Finding in androgyny (the rejection of all femininity) too much loss, too little pleasure, and ugly shoes, the fem(me) takes from the feminine a wardrobe, a walk, a wink, then moves on to sound the death knell of an abject sexuality contorted and subjected to moral concerns.¹¹

Apart from refusing the victim rhetoric that tends to accompany the chant of femme invisibility, Duggan and McHugh wisely point out that the femme has often been invisible to lesbian history because she has not always identified as or presented as a lesbian. Rather, the femme, they argue, represents a perverse proliferation of femininity which was not legible as turn of the century inversion, and remains illegible within contemporary understandings of lesbianism. Femme history, then, is not only the project of bringing femmes to light within butch-femme history or rewriting lesbianism to include these women, it is about reading the particular contours of perverse femininity as they snake in and out of the hetero/homo binary.

I believe that it may be of use to this discussion to uncouple butch from femme in order to attend to the specific problems associated with butch abjection and femme erasure. Sometimes butch and femme are seen as mutual constructions forming together a lesbian subject; indeed, Sue-Ellen Case has argued that 'the butch-femme couple inhabit the subject position together'.¹² But perhaps this perverse coupling is precisely the problem; when butch-femme is a coupled subject, butch represents visibility and lends queerness to the femme and the femme is rendered completely butch-dependent. The construction also privileges the couple form and establishes gender as the primary, indeed the only, dynamic of difference at work. Butch, like any other gender identity, also relies heavily upon racial and class constructions and the racial and class identities of the butch and the femme in that fabled butch-femme couple may intervene in the primacy of the butch-femme dyad. A couple may as easily be primarily identified in relation to interracial lines of difference as gendered lines of difference. If we want to think in terms of the couple as our lesbian subject (and I actually think we do not) then that couple may be Latina-Asian as much as butch-femme, or butch-black, or Asian-femme, or white

butch/Asian femme or middle-class butch/working-class femme, or an exponential number of other variations on the theme of race, class and gender in the field of sexuality. Butch-femme is ultimately an intriguing and crucial formulation of lesbian desire but it also obscures many other channels of difference and desire or, to use Split Britches' memorable phrase, of lust and comfort.

In many instances, quite obviously, at the level of both public and private histories, butch and femme are separate constructions with different trajectories, different childhoods, different sets of defining experiences. If tomboyism for the butch represents a paradigmatic past and gender ambiguity represents an embodied experience of everyday life, what are the equivalent paradigms of femme reality? Some femmes also report a tomboy past and some femmes also experience gender ambiguity, but one can assume that since they have arrived at an identity grounded in femininity, those experiences must signify differently than they did for butches. Tomboyism, of course, covers a large amount of ground given the very narrow strictures for feminine behaviour among children. However, some young tomboys are characterized as active girls and others, possibly the butch tomboys, are simply read as boys, as gender ambiguous or at any rate as gender inappropriate. Femme tomboyism and butch tomboyism may not, after all, have much to do with each other. Some femmes share heterosexual pasts, some pass through butchness before they arrive at femmeness, some move back and forth between boy identities and woman identities. Obviously, much work remains to be done on exactly how we can and should define the parameters of femme identity. Inevitably theorizations of butch and femme identities will overlap and have much in common; inevitably, they will also diverge and require separate accounts of gender variance.

I want to turn now to the project of 'butch disclosure' in order to produce a model for butch scholarship, one which does not obliterate femmeness, one indeed which records butch debt to femmes and femmeness at every turn, but one also which delves into the complexities of butch belonging.

2 Between butches

Like many a pulp novel in the 1950s, Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* has been passed around as a kind of primer for butch awareness in the 1990s. The novel has been hailed by a huge readership, gay and straight, and has made its appeal to non-role-oriented dykes as well as butches and femmes. At least part of the enormous success of this brilliant novel has to do with the picture of butch community that Feinberg conjures up and the ways in which she details the pleasures as well as the intense liabilities of queer masculine embodiment. Feinberg makes her readers aware over and over that the butch life is not simply heroism, motorbikes, suits, jeans and femme companionship (or as Jess remembers it, 'butch friends, drag queen confidantes, femme lovers'³²); it is also defeat, poverty, violence, loneliness and the blues. The butches are shut down and closed off, left out and inappropriate; they fight, they hurt, they continue. And indeed, in this melodramatic narrative, butchness also sometimes defines itself against the selflessness of the femme, her unending tears, her bounteous empathy, her symphony of emotions.

Stone Butch Blues does tend to idealize femmes, in other words, so that they can be everything the butch is not, but the novel also makes it clear that this is a flawed butch view of the world and not objective in any way. On the subject of relations between

butches, the novel captures much more of the nuance, the subtlety, the ebb and flow of human bonds. For example, Feinberg describes the fathering of the young Jess Goldberg by her older butch role model, Big Al. Few readers of *Stone Butch Blues* can come away from this novel without considering Jess as much a product of her mentor as a product of her relations with femmes. In the 1950s, Feinberg makes it clear, butches passed on information to each other, watched and watched out for each other, competed with one another and learned through imitation. If we historicize butch, then, in terms of a system of intergenerational butch mentoring, this does not dispense with the coupling of butch-femme, but it shows how butches facilitate the construction of other butches and femmes facilitate the construction of other femmes. Butch Al, Jess Goldberg recalls, 'nurtured my butch strength the best way she knew how. And, she reminded me frequently, no one had ever done that for her when she was a baby butch, and she had survived. That was strangely reassuring. I had Butch Al for a mentor.'¹⁴ Just the existence of the established role 'baby butch' (a role that has no parallel among femmes) suggests that butch mentoring is an important mode of personal development and community building. It hints at a homosocial organization of affiliation which for sure can easily tip into the worst forms of exclusivity and misogyny, but which in its more benign forms also provides crucial support for the young butch.

Contemporary butch discourse within academia may seem unlikely to afford us a glimpse at butch mentoring but, I would argue, the development of what we recognize as one very important strand of queer theory shows signs of precisely this form of intellectual sponsorship. Furthermore, in theoretical discourse which is preoccupied with 'gender trouble', moments of personal disclosure attempt to make clear the exclusions upon which transgressive cross-identifications may be based. Contemporary queer theory under the influence of Judith Butler's work has come to circulate endlessly around problems of butch and femme subject positions, and theories of performativity have taken as their foundation the insights produced by drag into the processes involved in the construction of gender and in the bodily occupation of gender roles. The usefulness of drag and performance in theorizing gender was first highlighted by Esther Newton's brilliant anthropological study of drag queens, *Mother Camp*.¹⁵ Indeed, Judith Butler relates her debt to *Mother Camp* in an essay titled 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination', when she provides her readers with an uncharacteristic moment of personal confession: 'As a young person,' she tells us, 'I suffered for a long time from being told that what I "am" is a copy, an imitation, a derivative example, a shadow of the real.'¹⁶ But she finds an answer to this accusation through her reading of Newton's book. 'I remember quite distinctly when I first read in Esther Newton's *Mother Camp* that drag is not an imitation or a copy of some true and prior gender; according to Newton, drag enacts the very structure of impersonation by which any gender is assumed.'¹⁷ This moment of what we might call 'reluctant butch disclosure' suggests the ways in which the personal and the theoretical are imbricated in all projects about queer belonging, queer dislocation and queer identity. We find our way, in other words, to a theoretical understanding of the mechanisms of subjectivity through our own histories of unbelonging. We embrace our personal memories of dislocation and dysphoria through theoretical rewritings of moments of shame and embarrassment, rejection and disjunction.

But those rewritings have not come easy in the realm of the butch and, indeed, butch disclosure and butch memoir, I would venture to argue, have been predictably some of the more constipated genres of personal confession; very often a butch memoir pales in

comparison to the positively bounteous and richly descriptive confessions of femme life such as those produced by Joan Nestle and others.¹⁸ But, reluctant and stilted as it may be, the moment of butch revelation refuses the hygienic transgression that Biddy Martin has read into queer theory and it shows how difficult and attenuated queer embodiment can be. The stakes of the queer project as revealed through butch confession cannot be reduced to some version of ludic postmodernism or abstract rebellion; rather queer discourse in these fragments of autobiography reveals one motivation of queer theory to be the attempt to explain awkward embodiment and its stigma.

While Butler finds a way to express her particular gender trouble through Esther Newton's work, Newton has also injected her own work with these moments of laconic butch self-revelation. In the appendix to *Mother Camp*, she offers us this gem of a story: while working with some female impersonators in Kansas City, Newton tells us,

I considered my own role to include a great deal of participation . . . I not only listened and questioned, I also answered questions and argued. I helped out with shows whenever I could, pulling curtains, running messages for the performers, and bringing in drinks and French fries from the restaurant across the street. When the performers half-jokingly suggested that I should stand in for an absent stripper, however, I drew the line.¹⁹

Finally, Newton gets what she considers to be full acceptance in this backstage life when a drag queen casually responds to a visiting impersonator who had asked who Esther was, 'Oh she's my husband'.²⁰ This anecdote provides a lovely insight into Newton's investment in the world of female impersonators. She understands her own gender identity as a role and she carefully marks the boundaries of her role in this personal confession. The queens tease Newton about her own performances by including her in their backstage banter and pulling her into the business of running a show. 'I drew the line', Newton notes, when asked to stand in for an absent stripper. Her disjuncture from the role of stripper and her obvious pleasure at being called the drag queen's 'husband' mark Newton's butchness in clear terms and make obvious her own gendered investments in this theatrical world of camp and impersonation. The appearance of moments of butch disclosure in theoretical texts, I am arguing here, are important to the project of queer gender precisely because they infuse what Biddy Martin and others have dubbed celebrational anti-foundationalist accounts with the pathos of personal rejection, the difficulty of cross-identification and the reluctance of self-exposure. Far from this project revelling in the fashion options that queerness presents, the project of gender trouble is obsessed with and remains committed to explicating irrational gender identifications. In other words, there are selves behind the projects and those selves are deeply invested in discovering how to articulate desires and genders that we have been told make no sense.

While some may feel that the entire project of lesbian history has been an excavation of the butch and her habits, her troubles, her lifestyles, her lovers, it is also clear that we have only just begun the long task of unravelling the meaning of female masculinity and its relation to queerness. Just taking a quick look at Esther Newton's theoretical preoccupations over the last twenty years gives us some idea about how long it takes to properly formulate and produce butch history. In 1972, for example, Newton provided an interesting footnote to *Mother Camp*. She wrote:

There are also women who perform as men: male impersonators ('drag butches'). They are a recognized part of the profession but there are very few of them. I saw only one male impersonator perform during field work, but heard of several others. The relative scarcity of male impersonation presents important theoretical problems.²¹

In an essay appearing in print in 1997, some twenty-five years later, called 'Dickless Tracy and the Homecoming Queen' Newton finally returns to these important theoretical problems and begins to pick her way through the complicated terrain of butch camp and drag king theater.²² Newton's own publishing history, this particular lag between recognizing herself as the drag queen's husband, noting the absence of a comparable world of male impersonators and then finally picking up the threads of a butch camp project, shows the break in continuity between gay history and lesbian history, and shows, simply, how long it takes to complete the complicated archaeologies of gender-deviant lives. We have to pick our way through the strata of medical opinion and mainstream doctrines of pathology and then find our way to the vibrant vernaculars and inventive subcultures of queer lives. Butch history, far from being a completed project, has so far only filled in the barest details of the lives of a few extraordinary women. We still await the stories of butches of colour, the analyses of queer masculinities in immigrant populations, the formulations of class and butch power, the sometimes parallel and sometimes wildly divergent formations of butch and transgender masculinities.

I conclude these accounts of butch confessional style with my own brief and revealing butch disclosure. Many times as I have been working on my project on 'male Masculinity', I have reflected upon my own butch history and I have felt in my own life the lack of butch role models. My work on 'female masculinity' has been driven by the desire to claim my masculinity as credible and legitimate. In this essay in particular, I have wanted to articulate my sense of masculinity through the glimpses I have been given of other butch masculinities in contemporary queer gender theory. This is not to create some covenant of butches or a fraternity of queer masculinities, nor is it to render femme into a helpmate category; it is to acknowledge that butch does not essentially and necessarily partake in the privileges assigned to masculinity in a male supremacist society. Butches also suffer sexism, butches also experience misogyny; butches may not be strictly women but they are not exempt from female trouble. Butches, I have proposed here, find solace in the revelations of other butches; it is as if the shame of inappropriate gendering can be rendered more benign when it is shared across other bodies and other lives.

For many of us, the importance of the butch memoir *per se* has been the construction of butch community, butch history, butch types in the absence of flesh and blood models. Not surprisingly, then, the butch memoir has focused obsessively upon the butch as a tragic hero who is martyred by her sense of being out of place. Whether it is Stephen Gordon in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* discovering that 'the loneliest place in this world is the no-man's-land of sex',²³ or the 1950s butch Jess Goldberg in Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* finding herself out of time and place in contemporary lesbian New York, the narrative of the butch has been one of loss, loneliness and disconnection. But as we develop our butch histories and memoirs and explore this 'no-man's-land of sex', butchness and butch experience become less connected to the blues and more akin to rock and roll, less simply a narrative of loss

and more clearly a narrative of pleasure, less a story of the isolated individual and more a narrative of a community.

Recent visits to New York's drag king scene confirm for me a growing palette of butch pleasures, a lively sense of both parody and affirmation in the new world of male impersonation and butch realness. Recently, for example, it was Elvis night at Club Casanova and after three fine performances by Drag King Elvises culminating in a sweaty and hilariously bloated performance of the paranoid and drugged-up 'fat Elvis' by Drag King Murray Hill, I realized that butch camp is alive and well. I realized also that butchness is not always and does not have to be a melancholic construction of masculinity; it can also be what Butler calls in the conclusion of *Gender Trouble*, parodic repetition. While, again, this has been understood as a frivolous invitation to don drag and revel in subversion, it is actually a courageous attempt to move butchness in particular from loss and lack into extravagance and presence.

As butch culture flares up for a moment in its own peculiar and probably limited hour of glory, we should seize this moment to name our motivations, specify our pleasures and identify those places where transgression comes at a price. Some of those places will be the bonds between butches, the ties that bind masculine women across generational divides and produce common experiences through their awkward non-belonging. Between butches there may indeed be all kinds of homosocial circulations of power and desire, but they do not necessarily have any of the consequences that Gayle K. Rubin attributes to homosocial bonds between men. Between butches we can trace ideological lines of association, social structures of affiliation, psychic modes of identification and standardized forms of embodiment. The fact that there is some shared experience between butches should not lead simply to the romanticization or sentimentalization of these forms of exclusion; it should, however, dare us to consider butch solidarity as something shared, as an echo of identification across barren years of adolescence, as a borrowed bravery from another woman's masculinity, as a common language spoken and exchanged between butches.



Faith in Dancing (Eva Weiss, 1997)

Sheila Dances with Sheila

LOIS WEAVER

It was late and we'd had some drinks. We didn't usually go dancing. Didn't mean to this time. Found ourselves, this odd group of five (three butches, two femmes) in an old-fashioned kind of place. Not quite ready to give up the night. I could taste the bourbon when I walked in and long before the butch behind the bar reluctantly interrupted her conversation with the two long-haired femmes perched attentively on stools in front of her and strolled in our direction. She took our order and we chatted away feeling so in it and yet above it. So informed. So contemporary. Then I don't remember how it happened. One butch asked another to dance. They do that some times. They also meet for breakfast and girl talk in their work skirts and stockings. So it wasn't unusual. But for us, me and Sheila, it was something different.

I couldn't dance with Sheila.
It was the queerest thing.
She had this
Sound
about her, this odd familiar Ring
-ing
in my ears and in my throat and down inside my
heart
and though she led with ease I couldn't play the part
of femme
to a Melody so much like mine.

It started out all right. The music was fine. Not a vertical rock. More of a horizontal roll. Slow. But not slow enough to touch. And yet somehow I kept reaching out. For balance, maybe. Something to stop the swaying of the room, this dizzy feeling like falling into a pool or waking up in a hall of mirrors. Was it you or me I saw reflected in the framed poster prints of Garbo, Dietrich, and Hepburn? Was it my head or your shoulder? If only we could talk, Sheila to Sheila.

SHEILA: Isn't this a pretty picture of the femme to femme dilemma? Exactly what you would expect. Two femmes not able to get along without a butch, not able to complement each other in the dance. It's the old 'Who is supposed to lead?' for God's sake.

SHEILA: I wasn't thinking about leading and following. It just came on me when I reached for you. I'm not sure if I was going to give you a butch twirl or lay my hand confidently on your shoulder but as I lifted my arm it seemed to dematerialize and disappear into you, as if the molecules broke apart and joined the picture in front of me and everything went fuzzy and vaseline lensed.

SHEILA: What's the matter? Afraid of coming too close to a girl like me? Afraid I might pounce? What is that? Homophobia? Or maybe you just don't want to give it up to another femme?

SHEILA: It was physical, this reaction and there was something adolescently terrifying about it. More about taboo than repulsion though. It is like that first shock of fear and horror you get when you're eleven or maybe thirteen and you realize you want to do it with your sister or even your mother and then you search the school yard for some girl that looks like your brother in order to make that desire feel more all right somehow. So it could be a deep homophobia or a fear of incest. But it felt more like a fear of dancing with an image in a mirror that could look back, really look back. More a fear of self-love. What would you call that?

SHEILA: Narcissophobia? Narcissophobia could be a fear of self-love but it could also be the fear of loving to look at yourself in the mirror. Let's face it, butches are vain and femmes are narcissistic. And femmes are often mirrors for each other and it's different in public and private. In public there's the femme to femme greeting 'Oh my God



Not Just an Asian Babe (Permindar Sekhon, 1997)

you look so great!' which says that I recognize the effort you made and implies that I imagine that you made that effort for me. In private there's always the whispered, 'Does this look all right on me? Am I too old for this outfit? Is this too tight? too short? too slutty? too butch? What do you think of the pink or the brown one? sweater or coat? Is this too much like what you have on?'

SHEILA: It's mixed, this affair.

SHEILA: Affair with me?

SHEILA: With the mirror. Going shopping I rarely ever like what I see. I almost think that department stores alter the mirrors in order to create so much self-loathing that you'll buy more to make yourself feel better.

SHEILA: I feel like that with other femmes. I shop from other femmes. I often think, if I had more of what she has I'd feel better about myself.

SHEILA: But then there are times, like in a restaurant, when I sit facing a mirror and try to keep my attention on the conversation, all I really want to do is stare into the mirror, spy on myself in public. It was a little like that dancing with you. It was like when you get an unexpected glance at your profile or the back of your head or for a split second you imagine the eyes in the mirror shifted away from your gaze. You realize it is you and yet independent of you. Dancing with you, I suddenly had the permission to I look at myself in motion and I felt like I was going to crash through the glass.

... we looked alike. Had been mistaken for each other. Could have played doubles in the movies if the movies had been our business. Could have been Tippy dancing with Tippy or Kim with Kim in our black flats and fake fifties slacks.

I couldn't dance with Sheila

No matter how I tried

For when I laid my

Hands

across her fine

spaghetti straps – traps, raps, slaps, sirens

turned into a high pitched Whine-Not

curve my arms around the roundness of her shoulders

with their familiar aching hum

I think I wanted some.

SHEILA: Then the real question is do I want you or do I want to be you?

SHEILA: Or rather, if you want me, what do you want me for? That's where our sexual practices get mixed up with our outfits. It's nothing to do

with if and how we might have sex. It's how the whole thing *appears* even to us on our private movie screen. It's both sexy and scary. It's like being caught masturbating in public.

SHEILA: Or in front of the mirror. When I was a kid, I kissed the mirror and tried to understand what it would feel like to kiss me by the way my lips looked against the glass. I would lean my breasts against my thighs and imagine what it felt like to have someone's breasts pressed up against my body. I felt that same seduction when dancing with you. I wanted to hold a body that looked so much like mine. But wanting you like that is embarrassing because it feels like wanting myself.

SHEILA: So you think you could lose yourself in me, do you? Frightened you might fall into the mother flesh and abandon all sense of direction? What's wrong with that?

SHEILA: Wrong? I do crave your company and, well, intimacy but it is true that I don't often take the risk of getting that close to another femme.

SHEILA: Fear of rejection?

SHEILA: Maybe. Mostly I think it is a fear of being compared. I do seem to care about how I appear in front of other femmes more than butches. I put on my lipstick when I know I'm going to see you. I evaluate my weight and consider my wardrobe much more when I know I'm going to see another femme than when I go out with a butch.

SHEILA: That's because you know I know where to look. I can see the difference between the colour of your lipstick and the colour of your lip liner. I know how and where you might hide things.

SHEILA: It's true. You know my secrets. And maybe that's what makes us suspicious and competitive. We are hard on each other because we are hard on ourselves. I remember my first femme friend, if you could call it that. Her name was Hedda. She was the first person outside of my family that I could feel looking at me. 'When are you going to start wearing a bra?' she'd ask in a voice that made me think I should have been wearing one long before now. 'When are you going to start shaving?' she shouted at me from across the hall. I was standing in the lunch line between her and an open door. I could see the hairs on my legs standing straight out and lit up by the light coming in through the doorway, quivering from her attention. I went home that night and managed to sneak a razor from my sister or mother or maybe I constructed a need to go shopping and bought one on the sly. I know that I didn't talk to anyone about this but I got what I needed through lies, manipulation or theft and then secreted myself in the bathtub to remove the offending hairs. Hedda was my

first encounter with a peer group femme. Just like my mother, she challenged, humiliated, and seduced me. I both wanted her and hated her. I secretly plotted her murder and my escape. It was that first realization that someone so close to me could form an opinion of me that was different from my own. Because she gossiped with me I suddenly realized she could gossip about me and that made me feel threatened and competitive.

SHEILA: I think it is competition that stands between us. Not simply competition for the butch's favour. It is more complicated and bigger than that. It is wanting what each other has and fearing there will not be enough of it to go around. We're afraid that the very nature of our sameness or our affinity toward the same things like fashion and any of the things that define us publicly will undermine our individuality. We don't have a culture of femmeness in which we celebrate our affinities. I want to be different, to stand out. I like to think that my desire for a certain leopard-skin coat is mine and mine alone, completely original.

SHEILA: I think it has a lot to do with confidence and where the feminine finds her confidence in a boy's world. Our confidence lies in our distinctness, our ability to stand out, our individuality.

SHEILA: Do you mean to say that we rely on our looks for our confidence? This sounds so straight! If it is true that femmes dress for each other and that we vie with each other for the butch's attention then how are we any different from straight women?

SHEILA: We're different because we are resistant.

SHEILA: Resistant? and not compliant?

SHEILA: I'm not talking about sex.

SHEILA: Sure you are. This whole conversation has been about resisting your desire for me.

SHEILA: How could I possibly resist when you're standing so close? I don't know whether to pull you into me or push you back far enough to get a sharper focus. Maybe that pulling in and pushing out at the same time is what I mean by the femme's resistance. Not just sexual but political and theatrical. A butch is a resistant persona because she is resistant to the idea of what it means to be female and a drag queen is resistant to what it means to be male. Their appearance challenges those ideas of gender identity. I think that a resistant femme can embrace traditional images of femininity and resist them at the same time.

SHEILA: Sounds like a lot of work. Just *being* femme is high maintenance.

SHEILA: I like to think that we can play the part and comment on it at the same time. That we can put on femmeness in a way that signals the

fact that we *know* we are being femme. There is a space between the photographic image and the real thing. It's in that misfit or crack that I like to think you can see the resistance. Sometimes for me it's the dirty fingernails or, thankfully now, the unshaved legs.

SHEILA: Don't you think that might be dependent on age or generation? When I think of 'putting on femmeness' it's usually some kind of a fifties dress or I imagine a butch in a forties suit. I know that has to do with my age. Younger butches and femmes use a more contemporary style. So I wonder if it is harder to find the crack. I wonder if imitating *Vogue* or your mother as a teenager is more resistant than playing femme as Drew Barrymore.

SHEILA: A resistant femme style is not just about clothes, it's about behaviour. Sharon Jane Smith wrote a song that begins with this line 'I'm stuck between polish and no polish at all. I've seen a good shoeshine but I wonder if it matters at all'. Stuck between the shoe and the shine is a very butch image but we could transpose it to stuck between the 'lip and the gloss'. It's the gloss and no gloss. It's now you see it, now you don't. It's doing the trick and exposing how it is done. That 'old femme trick' is when the femme is happily fixing the car and still *looks* like she could use a little help.

SHEILA: And just who is she doing that performance for? Another femme? I don't think so. She is happily self-sufficient in her ability to fix the car but she wants to think some big butch might come and take over. Happy and confident as she is, don't you think she is searching for someone to lead that dance?

SHEILA: Look I admit I use my resistance or tricks to attract a butch. I like butches. That is part of what makes me femme and like everyone else, I have a desperation for the *other*. But at the moment, I am confused and fascinated by my desire or resistance to the desire for sameness.

SHEILA: OK, but that attitude will provoke some response from the 'what about me?' butches. Like what usually happens on the dance floor when two femmes start dancing. Suddenly we're surrounded by the self-mocking butch duets giving us their version of what sameness looks like on the dance floor. They need to point up the futility of our encounter. Oh, how could we possibly dance without a leader, have sex without a top, walk the streets without a butch?

SHEILA: It seems so much easier for a butch. I remember in 1983 we had a BUTCH NIGHT and a FEMME NIGHT at Wow in New York and the BUTCH NIGHT was a huge success with lots of butches coming forward and wanting to talk about themselves. When it came to FEMME NIGHT there was a lot of reluctance. It was early in the butch/femme renaissance and feminism still disapproved of lipstick and heels,

but even so it is just plain hard to describe this being and desiring the feminine. It wasn't so funny or so clear.

SHEILA: Why is this so hard to talk about? Just like a femme without a butch, it becomes invisible. Explanations seem cloudy and hidden. Hidden perhaps in the secrets that we so mundanely represent by lipstick and lip liner. Maybe the power of the feminine is that it does mystify, defy definition and therefore it inspires descriptions like suspicious, manipulative, deceptive.

SHEILA: Maybe there is no easy definition of femme and it's just not up to us to explain it.

SHEILA: Exactly. It reminds me of this butch who always says she's hoping that some time I will finally describe to her what this femme stuff is all about. She's waiting for me to answer the questions: What it means to be femme? What constitutes femme when not in relationship to butch? How do you recognize a femme on her own? I'm not sure I have an answer or that I want to. While I struggle against my invisibility as a woman and a femme and yet there is a part of me that wants to keep it a secret.

SHEILA: That's why your mirror of me is so powerful and seductive. It demystifies. It looks back and knows my secrets. Because a good femme is like a good cook. She can distinguish each ingredient with one taste, with one swift glance.

SHEILA: And like a good femme, she won't give away the recipe.

The juke box was filled with smoke and I was only slightly aware of the sharp black outline of three butches: one standing, one leaning, one sitting. They were far away on the horizon. Everyone else had gone home. The music stopped and we moved out of the red and green lights of the juke box and into the shadows. The streets were deserted when Sheila and I headed in opposite directions, each on the arm of a butch. When I got home I remembered my arm. I felt like I had left it there hanging in mid-air.

I couldn't dance with Sheila
 Her Time was fighting mine
 For outside the circle of her
 Tune
 I could keep the beat
 but here in the glare of the juke box lights,
 I couldn't make my feet
 move against the mirror of her shoes
 without crashing through the glass and looting flesh and bone-moan, groan,
 the tone, the tune that hum, the whine
 I think I wanted some
 of what was mine.

Femme to Femme: A Love Story

CLARE WHATLING

Psychoanalytic film theory has tended to operate through the binary formation of desire (equivalent to the masculine, active, object-focused or anacletic desire to have) and identification (equivalent to the feminine, passive, narcissistic, self-focused aspirational desire to be). Evident in this approach is the heterosexual imperative of the psychoanalytic formulation, that is, that such relations depend upon the institution of sexual difference as the polarization of male/female, masculine/feminine, subject/object, active/passive, sadistic/masochistic, anacletic/narcissistic. Though contemporary film theory seeks to separate these positionalities from a biological foundation, as these binary structures continue to operate as the discursive currency of the psychoanalytic terrain they engender a problem or two for a same-sex understanding of desire. This essay will examine the playing out of this binary through the figure of the lesbian femme-identified spectator who 'looks lesbian'¹ at the feminized star on the screen. The star I will focus on is the French actress Germaine Lefebvre, popularly known as Capucine, star, along with Barbara Stanwyck, of the film *Walk on the Wild Side* (Edward Dmytryk, 1962, USA).

Generally, a lesbian femme mode of looking at the screen, when mentioned at all, has been figured in traditionally feminine and narcissistic terms. One looks as a femme at another feminine woman on screen in order to confirm one's own identifications (one identifies with whom one admires) or in order to copy the screen femme's look (one admires whom one aspires to be). Femme/femme desire is then always and solely aspirational. While considering this mode of looking, and figuring at least some of its more covert erotic possibilities, I am equally as interested in pursuing what I would rather term the anacletic possibilities of femme/femme desire within the cinema. How does the femme-identified lesbian viewer render visible her desire for the screen femme, and how might one articulate this desire through the terms which conventionally operate to inhibit its expression?

These are issues we will be returning to shortly. First, however, a brief look at some recent feminist approaches to *femmininity* on screen.² For Andrea Weiss (1992) the narcissistic position is not readily available to lesbians: 'Since lesbian images have been chronically absent from the screen . . . [hence] it is questionable whether lesbians would enter into the spectatorial position of 'over-presence' of narcissistic or masochistic over-identification.'³ Weiss therefore situates lesbian spectatorship with the butch lesbian. While I believe this over-simplifies the construction of butch lesbian identification and desire, it quite clearly, and most worryingly, erases femme lesbian identification and desire from the specular equation. Weiss admits that she cannot account for femme lesbian desire, which remains 'largely a matter of speculation'.⁴

Weiss's negative representation has, I suspect, much to do with the difficulty even feminist critics have in recognizing the individuality of the femme lesbian within the specular economy of the masculine screen. For Weiss, the lesbian femme does not even

figure as a visual possibility where a feminine woman on screen is always already recuperable to the voyeuristic and heterosexual male gaze. Two femmes on screen only compound the effect, as Weiss, here talking about lesbian vampire movies, makes clear:

The typical vampire and her victim are both visually coded as heterosexual and feminine, even though the narrative sets them up to be lovers. *They lack the lesbian verisimilitude that would enable them to 'pass' as lesbians*; they flirt with men and dress (and undress) to appeal to male-desire.⁵ (my emphasis)

While it is largely true that, as Weiss argues, the lesbian vampire in the Euro-horrors of the 1960s and early 1970s was intended to appeal to a male heterosexual audience, I cannot agree that a pandering to male voyeurism necessarily inhibits the articulation of either lesbian identification or desire. Indeed, her assumption that because a woman does not pass as butch she lacks lesbian verisimilitude is breathtaking (though not unusual in writings about femme identity).

In fact, for me, Weiss's focus upon the femininity of the lesbian vampire seems to be a more productive category than she gives it credit for. For Weiss, the femme lesbian is primarily a dissimulator:

Unlike the 'masculine' images of lesbians in more mainstream films of the late sixties and early seventies – *The Fox* (Mark Rydell, 1967 [USA]) and *The Killing of Sister George* (Robert Aldrich, 1968 [USA]), for example – the lesbian vampire fits the stereotype, not of the mannish lesbian, but of the white, feminine, heterosexual woman. Her vampirism, therefore, is doubly disturbing, as she appears 'normal' by society's standards for women and yet is not.⁶

She therefore dissimulates right into the heart of hetero-patriarchy. The fact that this dissimulation gets lost in the theoretical bid for visibility is only one of the ironies at work in the representation.

Because, in writings about butch/femme, it is so often the butch who signifies lesbianism through her visual investment in masculine dress (the femme is rendered visible as a lesbian when seen publicly alongside her butch lover), the femme remains lesbian, as it were, only by association. Remarks Joan Nestle (1992): 'Butches were known by their appearance, femmes by their choices.'⁷ Indeed, lesbian visibility remains largely dependent upon the woman who physically (and by this I include stance, gesture, hair and dress, in other words all the socially inscribed signifiers of what has come to be known as gender performance) identifies herself as butch. As a result, the visual connotation of active lesbian desire in cinema theory remains predicated upon the cultural equation butch = lesbian. As Cheshire Calhoun argued recently, 'Butches figure the lesbian in ways that their feminine counterparts cannot. In their power to generate the question "To which sex does s/he belong?" they invite a reading of them as lesbians.'⁸ Calhoun is swift to point out that she is not proposing a hierarchy whereby the butch lesbian comes to represent the real to the femme's undecided. Her argument is merely that ambiguous gender status operates as the signifier of difference and that the masculine lesbian visualizes this in a way that the femme does not.

Even so, this emphasis on the butch as articulator of lesbian desire has continued to skew the way in which visibly masculine and feminine identified lesbians have

continued to be represented and understood. Lisa Walker in 'How to recognize a lesbian: the politics of looking like what you are' (1993) argues that there is a tendency for lesbian critics to theorize largely from the position of the butch, conferring upon her the position of active, instigative desirer, while confining the femme to the role of passive recipient of her desire. Isolating Sue-Ellen Case's 1988-9 essay 'Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic' in particular, Walker argues:

In each of these passages [discussed by Case] the butch is represented as the desiring subject whilst the femme is represented as the object of desire. Thus, while Case's essay suggests that 'the butch-femme couple inhabit the subject position together - "you can't have one without the other"' . . . it could be argued that another meaning behind the phrase is something like 'a femme is not queer without her butch.' While the butch can stand alone as the 'marked taboo against lesbianism,' the femme is invisible as a lesbian unless she is playing the butch.⁹

Walker, however, points to some ironies in the predominance of a politics of the visual in the social and theoretical articulation of identity:

While privileging visibility can be politically and rhetorically effective, it is not without its problems. Within the constructs of a given identity that invests certain signifiers with political value, figures that do not present these signifiers are often neglected. Because subjects who can 'pass' exceed the categories of visibility that establish identity, they tend to be regarded as peripheral to the understanding of marginalization.¹⁰

Extending her argument across race as well as sexuality, Walker demonstrates how the right of the woman of colour who can pass as white, or the lesbian femme who appears heterosexual, or the lesbian femme woman of colour who is recognized as neither, to be represented within her chosen community is put under question, or at least suspicion.

When faced by the issue of lesbian representation on screen, the mainstream and art cinema's response to the problem of sexual sameness has often been to render one of the lovers butch and the other femme. As Michèle Aina Barale (1991) points out, this gesture is a colonizing one whereby 'in order [for the dominant, here, heterosexuality] to appropriate the Other, it is represented as similar. Heterosexuality thus seeks to create lesbians whose desires are similar to its own.'¹¹ Within this formation then, the butch is figured alongside the active, pursuing, anacletic, masculine gaze, while the femme is presumed to passively acquiesce, content in her narcissistic role as object of the butch lesbian gaze.

As Barale also notes, the visual display of sex/gender positioning is often complemented by a difference in hair colour, dark for the butch and blonde for the femme. For Louise Allen amongst others, this distinction is predicated upon the racial construction, dark = bad and blonde = all that is desirable. As Richard Dyer puts it, 'the blonde woman comes to represent not only the most desired of women but also the most womanly of women'.¹² This is a distinction which Allen explores in her reading of *Salmonberries* (Percy Adlon, 1991, Germany). Though I think Allen is absolutely right in her reading of the interpellation of racial difference (which always returns to the assertion of white privilege) in the film, I find the way in which she positions *femmeininity* as a result, problematic. For Allen, as for Calhoun, the butch cannot pass since she remains

always visibly visible. This visibility is conveyed, she argues, and quite rightly, through more than just dress:

cultural identification is conferred through dress codes and skin colour . . . but it is also conferred through language (use of patois, Asian languages, gay and lesbian language such as palare and 'code names' in lesbian and gay culture), accent, sentence construction, badges, signs, walk, pose, mannerisms, 'the look' etc.¹³

Allen then admits that 'Black people, "white" enough to "pass" have all these forms of identification to employ in order to identify as black, and so do lesbian femmes in order to identify as lesbians.'¹⁴ And yet, she claims, in practice, 'What happens *most of the time* is that some black people passing as white and some lesbian femmes also use these other (non-visible?) strategies in order to invest in privileges of whiteness and heterosexuality respectively' (my emphasis).¹⁵ Though she limits her accusation to 'some' black people, 'some' lesbian femmes, the implication of duplicity remains, with the two reduced to collaborators until proven innocent. So an essay which is sensitive to the implications of one type of cultural colonization, reads as profoundly insensitive to the configurations of another. Once again the femme is rendered complicit with the racial and sexual hegemony of white heterosexuality.

The fact that the cinematic femme lesbian often does pass as the white heterosexual cinematic ideal (that is, as feminine and blond), with all the sexual and racial connotations attached by this, does perhaps, as Allen argues, situate her more firmly than the butch within the hegemonic discourse. This does not mean that she is not also 'other' to the (white, otherwise racially inscribed) lesbian-, femme-, butch- (or any combination of the two), idealized spectator. It does suggest that her otherness (her manifestation of a socially constructed femininity, predicated upon her blondness and whiteness) might be a spur to her aspiration (to be that much of a woman, *and* a lesbian) and desire (to desire what is other to oneself in the other) for a spectator who feels these culturally inscribed ideals to be lacking in her own look.

For me a femme desire for the feminine on the screen always embraces this double-bind. For to aspire is to seek to make good a lack one perceives in one's own self-image. What is more, where aspiration predicates itself on a lack, it registers a difference between itself and its aspiration. And where difference is registered, so proliferates desire, a desire which I would argue predicates itself on the tension between sameness (narcissism) and difference (anacsis). The double-edged quality of this desire is summed up by Wendy Frost in describing her desire for actress Melina Mercouri:

I thought then [in adolescence] that what I wanted was to be her, to be that desirable. In my thirties, looking back on this and many other memories of being drawn to erotic images of women, I thought that I simply wanted her, but had no language at the time to know it. Now I look again with the femme's double vision, and I know that both are true. I desire her. I desire to be desired by a woman the way that I desire her.¹⁶

It is, then, in the space between the desire to be and the desire for, that *femmeininity* proliferates its meanings on the screen.

Recognizing that an identification with or desire for the screen femme, be she coded lesbian or heterosexual, may well play into racial constructions of beauty as both feminine



Capucine, from *Walk on the Wild Side* (Columbia, USA, 1962, dir. Edward Dymtryk) (Courtesy Kobal Collection)

and white, I nevertheless want to pursue this notion of femme visibility and femme/femme desire to what are, for me, some of its logical conclusions. This seems particularly pertinent to my account of Capucine, who, as I shall argue, is not only not blond, but whose characterization in *Walk on the Wild Side* depends upon a traditional Hollywood configuration of the enigmatic woman as racial and/or exotic, other.

Hallie Gerard (Capucine) is a sculptor, discovered living in poverty by Jo (Stanwyck) and brought to New Orleans to sculpt whilst working in Jo's brothel. The film hints at, but given the still draconian Hays Code of the time, cannot visualize except by association, Jo's sexual desire for Hallie, a desire which Hallie is implicated in by default. The film visualizes Jo's lesbianism through dress – her penchant for severely cut suits and through that classic denotation of sexual repression, sadomasochistic violence, a violence which she enacts against most of the other characters in the film. As her 'best "girl"',¹⁷ Jo is good to Hallie but only so long as Hallie bows to her greater will. In the course of the film Hallie is found, and re-heterosexualized, by her old lover Dove Linkhorn (played by Laurence Harvey) and the fight for possession is then staged (literally by the end of the film) over Hallie's dead body.

My reverie on the figure of Capucine begins with a film still. The photograph shows Capucine as Hallie Gerard in a conventionally feminine pose, passively reclining on satin

cushions, the presence of the sleepy cat suggesting a dreamy indolence. Her eyes are shut. She can be seen but cannot see. The encouragement to the viewer to voyeuristically participate in the spectacle of the beautiful woman laid out to be looked upon is very clear. The woman is there for the looking.

All this is there in the photograph. What is not there, where the object to be looked at is presumed to be available to the sadistically motivated male gaze or the narcissistic and heterosexually identified female gaze, is my own *femme* lesbian investment. Not that my gaze is not implicated in the two others, both aspirational and voyeuristic. Certainly it is both of these. But it is still a lesbian aspiration and a lesbian voyeurism, one that cathects upon the feminine as that which it pursues for itself.

What concern me are the various sex/gender negotiations operative in such a relation. I look at Hallie/Capucine as a *femme*-identified lesbian who covets the socially inscribed feminine. My lesbianism, albeit couched in *femme* terms, renders me inadequate in relation to this figure who appears to embody the received expectations of the dominant social order (that is, appears to be heterosexual). I both long to be this woman, to share her validation by the dominant, and to have her for myself, a fantasy of possession which remains for me a leitmotif of the cinematic experience of looking lesbian.¹⁸ How do I figure this desire in conventionally psychoanalytic terms? If we recall, by such terms in order to identify anally one needs to identify as active, that which is masculine (in lesbian terms an identification defined by the category butch). In my aspirational anxiety and continuously focused anal desire for the *femme*, might it be that I am identifying as butch while looking *femme*, leaving Capucine/Hallie as the heterosexually feminine to my butch lesbian? If this is so, then, like Walker, I would argue the limits of the visible fail in understanding the often complex arrangements of sex, gender, sexuality and desire that operate in even the most apparently visually articulated of identities. For by the terms of the visibly visible, the *femme* lesbian fails to be identified not only as lesbian-*femme* but also as lesbian-butch.

The failure of the purely visual to articulate lesbian identity is argued by Judith Butler, who observes that:

Sexuality is never fully 'expressed' in a performance or practice; there will be passive and butchy *femmes*, *femmy* and aggressive butches, and both of those, and more, will turn out to describe more or less anatomically stable 'males' and 'females'. There are no direct expressive or causal links between sex, gender, gender presentation, sexual practice, fantasy and sexuality.¹⁹

Indeed, she continues:

Part of what constitutes sexuality is precisely that which does not appear and that which, to some degree, can never appear. This is perhaps the most fundamental reason why sexuality is to some degree always closeted, especially to the one who would express it through acts of self-disclosure.²⁰

Indeed, I would argue that it is my visual presentation of *femminity* which is dependent upon my scopophilic appropriation of a butch identification, that underpins my desire for the screen *femme* and structures my desire as simultaneously *femme* (narcissistic) and butch (anal).

As Cheshire Calhoun suggests: 'the more vigorously one attempts to read *femme* lesbian sexuality for sex/gender ambiguity, the more powerfully *femme* sexuality figures

the lesbian.²¹ She does not specify what forms this might take, but a few spring to mind. The embracing of a hyperfemininity, a kind of high femme drag seems a possibility. This is something which Teresa de Lauretis begins to articulate in her characterization of Jo's striptease in *She Must Be Seeing Things* (Sheila McLaughlin, 1987, USA) as 'the camp reappropriation of feminine gender signifiers'.²² The exhibiting of a femme style with just a touch of butch seems another. Argues Mykel Johnson: 'Even if she is "beautiful" by . . . male standards, a femme dyke may do something to disrupt the image, intentionally break the rules.'²³ And if not in her 'look', is it in her look? Can the femme lesbian articulate, just by looking, and returning the look, that she is both object and subject of that look? After all, as Johnson argues, the femme 'breaks the cardinal rule: her audience is female not male. She flashes her eyes and smiles in a lesbian direction'.²⁴

While these elements may be visualized in my own look, is any of this apparent in the photograph of Capucine? Well, no, but then again one might have to pick one's moment. My reading of the film still depends upon my own lesbian investment in rendering Capucine/Hallie the object of my lesbian gaze. She is lesbianized by my desire rather than through any lesbian signification within the text of the still itself. Indeed, I composed this argument at a time when I assumed that Hallie's screen re-heterosexualization (represented through her return to the arms of Dove Linkhorn) was supplemented by the extra-filmic assurance of Capucine's off-screen heterosexuality.²⁵ Imagine my surprise, then, when, searching for biographical material about the actress, I came across an interview with American critic Boze Hadleigh, in which the star, in the discreetest and most elegant manner possible, comes out.²⁶ The temptation, of course, is to apply this knowledge to the film text, a text which is then replete with the subcultural knowledge not only of Capucine's lesbianism but of Stanwyck's as well.²⁷

That none of this is visible in the film text demonstrates the complexities under which even a medium as visually fetishistic as the cinema operates. No surprises there, then. No surprises either in my discovery that one of the many rumours about Capucine at the height of her career centred around gossip to the effect that she was in fact a male-to-female transsexual.²⁸ Evidently, the cultural equation between femininity and heterosexuality remains so basic that viewers will seek any rationalization to explain away one woman's love for another. That this aspersion of masculinity competes, and loses, against the visual representation of Capucine/Hallie as femininity personified only points to yet another irony in the playing out of appearances on the silver screen.

However, Hallie is not just configured as heterosexually feminine, but as exotically other as well, an exoticism that works to both interpellate and displace the racial distinctiveness of the character as translated from the book. In Algren's novel Hallie passes as white until the birth of her son exposes her African-American mixed-race inheritance, an exposure which forces her to leave the town where she has worked as a schoolteacher and head for the anonymity of the big city. In the film version, Hallie's racial distinctiveness is transmuted through the white but dark-skinned Capucine into an unexplained exoticism which is conveyed aurally as well as visually through the star's French accent (which, though not out of place in French-quarter New Orleans, is certainly distinct from the speech of the other characters). It seems clear to me that the film plays on the exotic otherness, in this case the Europeaness, of Capucine, while deracializing her character within an American context. Thus, race, like lesbianism, is connoted through forms which render its presence invisible to all but those who know what they are looking for.

It seems to me axiomatic that the cinema, far from being about the confirmation of narcissism or anaclysis, aids the proliferation of both into multiple configurations of identification and desire. Thus one might identify as a femme with the hyperfemininity of the Hollywood femme through a mode that might well be characterized as aspirational, but which may be, as in my own looking relations, object-focused as well, to wish to be the femme on the screen as confirmation of my own (not always unanxious) investments in *femmeininity*, and to desire her and want to possess her as deeply as any Hollywood hero. That this leaves me, theoretically speaking, identifying with the butch while appearing to be the femme, is only one of the ironies engendered by the visibility/invisibility conundrum. That this might translate to the butch who may desire to possess the feminine woman on the screen, usurping the prerogative of the male cinematic hero, but who is also fascinated, to the point of fantasizing a likeness, by her femininity, is a possibility I would at least like to postulate. Her both aspirational and anaclytic attachment to the hero I now virtually take for granted.

Clearly, it is my negotiation of a butch anaclytic desire which enables me to appropriate Capucine to a lesbian cinematic erotic while Capucine's rumoured gender dysphoria (cultural signifier of the impossibility of recognizing her femininity simultaneously with her lesbianism) simultaneously returns to haunt the play of possibilities between the two femmes. As a result, the cinematic experience of watching Capucine functions around a fundamental dissimulation. It is, however, a dissimulation which the lesbian femme viewer seems peculiarly suited to disclose. For the primacy of the heterotext is undercut by my lesbian appropriation of Capucine, an appropriation which is then marked by the subsequent knowledge that the figure so appropriated was a lesbian all along. Capucine's dissimulation as heterosexual within the Hollywood image machine and the cinema's representation of her character as white within a medium that fetishizes the femme as black and heterosexual are as a result dependent upon me, the femme-identified viewer, to demonstrate how she is in fact neither.

How Do We Look? Imaging Butch/Femme

CHERRY SMYTH

The 1990s have witnessed not only an attempt to separate sexual practice from sexual identity, and sex from gender, but have also heralded a time when the category of butch/femme has been thoroughly reworked. Ask me what I wanted from a butch/femme image in the late 1980s and I would have said romance, drama, role-playing, eroticism, mentoring, affirmation and aspiration. The images on my wall announced my coming out as femme, constructing my place in the ritual. Today my answer would be quite, if not completely, different. The stereotypical shaven-headed white butch clutching the slender, velveted waist of her lipsticked femme appears archival rather than current.

I no longer need to reiterate my identity by the domestic placement of butch/femme images, though Gene Tierney smouldering in von Sternberg's *Shanghai Express* (1941), has survived the decorating purges. Interestingly enough, it is a single image. She doesn't need a butch to be my femme. Similarly, in the cherished stills of James Dean, almost every white baby butch's totem, he is most certainly alone. Despite the fact that most Hollywood narratives swiftly squash any lesbian possibilities, such as Marlene Dietrich's kiss in von Sternberg's *Morocco* (1930) or Joan Crawford in Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954), lesbians have always derived delicious specular joy from isolated film stills. 'Successful appropriations and subversions of Hollywood plots, or naive fetishizations of the image?' asks Judith Mayne.¹ Many of these images work precisely because they are placed in isolation, appearing to be outside the apparatus of phallic power invested in the male look as figure and signifier of desire.

While feminism located gender oppression as the primary category for understanding power relations, queer defined sexual oppression as its primary site. Both risked running aground by essentializing those interpretations above all others, that is, 'gender/sexuality is identity', erasing the importance of class, race, ethnicity, age and ability. There was a time in the mid to late 1980s, in London at least, when lesbian courtship could not be seen as valid or erotically charged unless it was within the framework of butch/femme. That configuration proved you were bad and bold, flying in the frowning face of the lesbian feminist mummy. The most visible images of lesbian sex were often being staged in the SM club scene, and in pro-sex magazines like *Quim* and *On Our Backs*, which led to a conflation in some minds between butch/femme and SM. This persists, to some degree, despite the vanilla-encoded images of rosy, Gap-clad, farm-girl types in butch/femme couples. During the editing of this collection of images for this book, I left a message on the answering machine of a lesbian photographer whose work I had not seen for a while. 'Do you have any butch/femme photos?' I asked. Her reply through my machine went, 'I haven't really got any SM images . . .'

While butch/femme undoubtedly lives on and walks down your street, it has been reconfigured since its popular revival in the 1980s. The conditions which gave birth to butch/femme as a strategy in the 1950s and 1960s are described by Joan Nestle:

Butch-femme women made Lesbian visible in a terrifying way in a historical period when there was no Movement protection for them. Their appearance spoke of erotic independence, and they often provoked rage and censure from their own community and straight society.²

Due to the increasing visibility and power of the lesbian and gay community, the 1990s have seen some younger dykes repudiating the relevance of butch/femme as an erotic or political strategy. They say it's been done. Femmes have been known to challenge the implicit hierarchy inherent in the term, demanding that it be reversed as 'femme/butch'. For over a decade, the separate terms have been treated with amusing elasticity, like 'she's a femmy butch' or 'a butchy femme', which prove what many have long suspected – the categories cannot hold the myriad ways in which we perform our lesbian genders. Indeed, as Catherine Lord points out,

The 1990s may well be remembered as the decade when gender was discovered: altering it, revising it, reading it, crossing it, signifying it, performing it, inventing it, proliferating it, coloring it, erasing it, multiplying it, demolishing it.³

The insistence that a girl has to decide between being 'an Arthur or a Martha', as a popular 1950s British adage went, is no longer *de rigueur*. But significantly the term 'kiki' – someone who was neither, or both, never caught on. Instead we have seen the daddy-boy scene re-stage the often taboo butch-on-butch scenario and the plea for 'feminine', that is 'straight-acting', women – or the more blunt 'no butches need apply' appearing in personal ads. Does this signal a growing femme-on-femme configuration, or should that read 'feminine-on-feminine', as detailed in Louise Carolin and Catherine Bewley's contribution to this volume? And there is a difference.

The terms 'gender-bending', 'gender-blending' and 'transsexuality' have also become inadequate to describe those who shift back and forward, or from side to side, across bipolar gender boundaries. Transgender politics, especially, have had a huge influence on how we discuss the gender continuum and how butch/femme is positioned within it. As more butches transit from female to male, the term 'femme' for their female partners is often not enough or no longer accurate. Heather Findlay explores this dilemma in a frank and moving way in 'Losing Sue'.

Findlay's text attempts to unlock the difference between desiring a butch and desiring a female-to-male transsexual. There appears to be a need for more to be written about the heroism of the femme who desires what the rest of society deplores – the butch, the masculine woman. While the femme can still operate as an object of desire within the heterosexual dominant culture, the butch is often marked as asexual, ugly and sexually unattractive. Society views the femme with slightly more incredulous distaste because, after all, it appears that she could 'help it'.

Recently, there has also been a significant uncoupling of femme from butch, which is marked in this collection and reflected in most of the photographs selected, many of which show the subject alone. Some, such as the archive snapshots of Sue-Ellen Case and Esther Newton, were selected by the contributors themselves to accompany their

text. Others were chosen because they directly illustrated the written contributions, such as the press photographs of Jennifer Saunders, discussed by Anna Marie Smith, or the film still from *Walk on the Wild Side* of Capucine (p. 78), chosen by Clare Whatling. The rest of the images were selected to show how the signs of butch/femme were being relocated formally and ironically, as in the works of Canadian artists Shonagh Adelman and Cyndra McDowall, whose images imply a welcome, gendered viewer, or in the refusal of the binary, such as in the extravagant portrait of lesbian drag queen 'Queenie – aka Valerie Mason-John' by Simon Richardson (p. 86). The territory of masculinity has been invaded by 'Dréd' (by Del LaGrace, p. 155), who performs her funky blaxploitation heroes of the 1970s, both male and female, confounding the confines of 'drag king'. When s/he removes her male drag to become a foxy lady on stage, does s/he become a drag queen, a drag prince, and/or a femme?

Perminder Sekhon's 'Four Asian Butches', 1997 (p. 198), situates the women in front of a London 'Cash and Carry', referencing the socio-economic realities for many Asians in Britain, whose livelihood depends on wholesale merchandising. The shop is noticeably closed, suggesting that this route of business is not open to those in the family who do not conform, despite their sharp suits and ties. The street is otherwise empty. Does this signal that the photographer chose a safer time to stage the shoot? In a culture where gender is heavily encoded in traditional clothing – saris and suits – the butches' transgression is all the more marked. Placed together, the elements of gender, race, posture, gaze and location create a supremely powerful and defiant image. Do Asian women need fewer masculine signifiers than white Western women to pass as men? Or only to a white audience? Does their short hair act as enough to mark them apart? This image pushes up against the line drawn by the drag king, usually measured by the moustache, critiquing it as a white construct (in London at least, it mostly is) as much as Asian and white hetero-masculinity.

The presence of a powerful, direct, challenging gaze is common to many of the images, as in the autonomous, punky femme's look in Catherine Hennessy's 'Pride 1994' (p. 125). Do they know we're looking? Unlike the standard feminist account of the gaze in classical Hollywood cinema which is structured around the gratification of the male gazing at his female object and a narrative that moves relentlessly towards a resolution of perfect heterosexual coupling, these images disrupt heteronormativity.

Queer politics have also redefined the construction of the gaze. One of the most significant aspects of queer is address. It is not telling the straights how we live and love to gain their acceptance, as the campaign for positive images attempted in the 1980s, but speaking to ourselves with our own self-referential humour and irony, regardless of whether they 'get it' or not. It is not coming out to them, but on to ourselves.

In Annie Bungeroth's 'Mandy: Butch with Dildo and Gun', 1994 (p. 158), Mapplethorpe's 'Man in a Polyester Suit' meets 'Lesbian Boy in Shorts'. Bungeroth plays with the connotations of the cock and the gun, undermining the power of both by the oversized suit, the short trousers, the small hands. The overall effect collapses into hilarity – the gun is made impotent by the cock exposed as dildo. The original image is of a black man – is he assumed to have a gun as well as a big cock by the white viewer? Does the butch need to hold the gun defensively lest she be discovered to be packing/lacking? Here gender stands in for the otherness of race. It's hard to put a cock and a gun in the same frame without getting into trouble. Sally, my co-editor, thought it funny; I found it silly. The clash in our gendered perspectives made me interrogate why this image bothered me. Is

Bungeroth drawing parallels between the sex toy and the toy gun? Both are imitations of the 'real' thing. Does this mean that the lesbian boy wants to grow up to be a real man with a real gun? Does she know that she never will? Is that where the note of pathos comes from? It's tricky, unresolved. Perhaps, as a femme, I feel too protective of the exposed butch to enjoy the joke.

'Wailynn and Claire', Del LaGrace, 1994, below, echoes the defiant gaze of the 'Four Asian Butches'. 'Laura and Nina, Florence', Del LaGrace, 1993 (p. 56), is full of exuberant butch-bonding and a touch of the kind of cool that Nina Rapi describes as 'magia' when she details what makes a Greek Girl a dyke.



Wailynn and Claire (Del LaGrace, 1994)



Queenie – aka Valerie Mason-John (Simon Richardson, 1996)



Leonora and BJ, Blow Job (Del LaGrace, 1993)

The portrait of Valerie Mason-John (p. 86) also teases the line between femme and drag queen. Mason-John, a well-known London author/performer and MC, is caught here in unusually sombre mood, contemplating mortality with all the melancholic melodrama of an ageing female impersonator. This persona dons enormous hats and outrageously tailored costumes to the point where glamour hits hyperbole. Why not? Why should drag always reference the male subject – whether it be drag king performing to lesbians or drag queen, performing primarily to gay men? Why is camp considered the sole domain of gay men? Does misogyny have to be an essential ingredient? If by Jack Babuscio's definition, the four main components of camp are irony, aestheticism, theatricality and humour, this image qualifies. Isn't the Jewish lesbian folksinger, Phranc, performing Neil Diamond dyke camp? She wasn't in 1986, with a surfboard and a five-inch belt buckle which declared LESBIAN, but in 1997, she has acquired the necessary distance to become camp in the way k. d. lang never can. If Phranc had done in 1986 what she's doing now, her audience would have been almost exclusively gay men. Now dykes have caught on, stealing the methods from gay male culture. While dyke performance artist Helena Goldwater, wearing full high-femme drag, sings, 'I am the sun, you are the moon, I am the words, you are the tune, play me', in another homage-demolition of Neil, she's doing Barbra Streisand doing Neil. If Phranc is butch camp, Goldwater is femme camp.

Perminder Sekhon, performer and founder of Mehtab Theatre, further questions the axis of race and gender in her 'Not Just an Asian Babe', 1997 (p. 68), used to promote a play of the same name, written with Shakila Maan. The promotional leaflet read:

Wanted: Attractive Asian/Oriental girls required to work in the entertainment business. Long hair, no tattoos, piercing or skin complaints. Good rates. No experience needed. Apply now. A play about the life and times of three Asian babes.

The portrait is both disturbing and seductive as it toys with the tension between high-femme and drag queen. The smudged mascara and shadowed false eyelashes read like a bruise, the misshapen mouth like a swollen lip. The strands of hair falling down past one eye mask the face, reiterating its appearance of disguise and the suggestion of shame and/or abuse. In a dominant white culture where the Asian female is read as passive and as victim, the edgy self-assertion in this image is extraordinary.

Many of us indulge in an archaeology of desire, divining role models and icons from the past. British painter Gluck's deliciously butch 'Self-Portrait with Cigarette' (1925) graced my mantelpiece for years. (Note the recurrence of the cigarette as butch signifier in Sally Munt's portrait on the back cover and in Catherine Hennessy's 'Pride 1994' (p. 125), in which the cigarette seems to stand in for the cock. Is that why every butch I have ever desired is a smoker? And I hate cigarettes.) Nina Rapi retrieved an image from 1950 of Sotiria Bellou (p. 172) – sepia-tinted, self-possessed, sexy and suave – while Irish artist Joan Woods plucked out a mugshot of Della Rose (alias Clara Hays, Laura Casey and Laura Bullion) from a 1954 'Pictorial History of the Wild West' (p. 146). Rose rode with the Wild Bunch at the turn of the century and was arrested for her part in a train robbery in 1901. By computer manipulation and layering, Woods lays the archive image on a moss-green bed of gathered cloth, as if to soften and honour it. Again Della Rose, with her firm jaw and vulnerable eyes, gives the gaze that defies meek conformity. Woods allows the ambiguity of the image to float. She does not claim her as butch, as lesbian or as transgendered, but as a fantasy lover, who may be all or none

of these definitions, who flouted authority and appropriated society's privileges by 'passing'.

Sally and I wanted to run both images of Jennifer Saunders, the young working-class, 'cross-dressed' lesbian who was arrested for indecent assault in Yorkshire in 1991. Kippa Matthews's mid-shot, reproduced in the *Guardian* (a quality newspaper) (p. 186), shows a cocky, ebullient, almost triumphant young butch, tattoos and packet of fags clearly visible. The image in the *Sun* (a daily tabloid) (p. 180), however, presents her as pensive, looking away from camera, as though she is ashamed or remorseful. In both she is alone, an eighteen-year-old butch demonized for 'raping' two young women with whom she claims to have had consensual sex. The difference in the images further illustrates the mechanisms of class prejudice and homophobia which produced four rival accounts of Saunders' relationships during the trial and led to a six-year prison sentence.

In 'Leonora and BJ, Blow Job', by Del LaGrace (p. 87), the femme/butch dynamic is interrogated again. Is the black woman giving her white cock to the kneeling, white woman rendered femme by the fact that the butch is read as butch? Or is this a butch-on-butch scene? Does the fully clothed position of one suggest stone butch? How does the white dick change the way the image is received? Is the black woman usurping the power of the white dick and all it symbolizes? Is she denying the white viewer the expectation of the big black cock? Her gaze rides an ambiguity between accusation and stern come-on. It ensures the power remains with her. Surely her cultural identity cracks open the other/or mechanisms that have dominated relations of race, class and gender for too long, and makes us rethink the way sexual images are determined. The biracial image introduces the positions of master or slave, butch or femme, black or white, masculine or feminine, showing that one need not depend on the other for its definition. The rest of the photographs in this series develop the roles of submission and dominance, further integrating the stereotypical tropes of butch/femme and black/white. In another image (not shown here), the white woman is shown seated on the black woman's lap; in yet another, the naked black woman lies across the white woman's lap, and sucks at her breast, through a lacy bra.

Lace. The lace pillow, the lace and satin nightgown, the soft long hair, the lipsticked lips, the fluffy pussy where you want to be, your eyes half closing with dreamy lust. Capucine. The indirectness of her gaze allows me to feast my eyes on her. My mother was a high-femme, poised elegance, untouchable. Did I think I never could . . . touch? I'm not butch but, unlike Clare Whatling, who discusses this image in terms of femme-to-femme desire, this image makes me want to have a cock. Does that make me a straight man? While I used to put it down to internalized misogyny and fear of sameness, I am coming to believe that it is more a fear of mother/daughter incest that has shaped my desire for butch, and resistance of narcissistic identification, or narcissophobia as Lois Weaver puts it. I cannot look because I want it too much. Does that put the cat among the pigeons? That I do not want a butch instead of a man, but want her instead of another woman?

If some of these images beg the question 'but what's this got to do with butch/femme?', then this project will have worked. They function to highlight the difficulties of making butch or femme visible when located outside a couple and illustrate the influence of class, race, queer, transgender and camp on the postmodern butch/femme erotics of the late 1990s.

Waiting for No Man: Bisexual Femme Subjectivity and Cultural Repudiation

CLARE HEMMINGS

This essay begins to trace a history of the relationship between the figures of the bisexual and the femme. Section One looks at how bisexuality is employed both historically and in the present to situate femme as a 'subject-in-process', always implicitly about to make a heterosexual object-choice. Section Two explores contemporary articulations of femme as repudiating heterosexual object-choice, again exploring how bisexuality functions to endorse that femme positioning. In Section Three, I suggest that a bisexual femme subject position does not only rely on notions of bisexuality as endorsing heterosexuality. I am interested in the discursive breaks that occur when bisexuality is read in terms of culture as well as object-choice, such that a bisexual femme subjectivity no longer appears to be a contradiction in terms. These three sections could also be read as charting a femme progression from a subject bound to heterosexuality to a lesbian/queer subject; linked to a bisexual progression from potential structuring heterosexuality to bisexual subject.¹

One: Bisexual meaning and the femme 'subject-in-waiting'

Contemporary images of bisexuality mostly rely on the representation of more than one body. Charlotte Raven's 'Swap Shop' in the British *Observer Life* magazine is accompanied by a picture of two young, bald, slim, white people.² The one with the 'male' face and chest has female genitals, the one with the 'female' face and chest has male genitals. Two hermaphrodites? Two transsexuals? An attempt to represent a psychic bisexuality materially, perhaps?³ The cover photograph of the 'bisexuality issue' of *Newsweek* shows two men and a woman looking confrontationally at the camera.⁴ They are young, white and dressed in black and white. The woman is cross-dressed (but not butch); the men are androgynous-looking. The cover of the US magazine *Anything That Moves* again shows two men and a woman (holding a copy of the *Newsweek* 'bisexual issue').⁵ The woman's dress and demeanour code her as butch; the men are both coded as effeminate gay men.⁶ The two men, one white, one black, stand either side of the woman, who in this context reads as a Latina, bringing them into the picture, establishing their three-way relationship. It is fundamental to the functioning of this bisexual representation (and to bisexual representation more generally) that the 'three' be differently sexed, gendered and 'raced'. Bisexual representations commonly produce

bisexuality as 'going beyond' any number of binaries (gender, sex and 'race' in particular) such that Marjorie Garber can say that 'In a world in which a person could only be classified as male or female, black or white, gay or straight, bisexuality simply does not fit in'.⁷ All three examples provide a dual reading of bisexuality. They represent both the bisexual body itself (as hermaphroditic, as dual-gendered or beyond gender), and the focus of bisexual desire. They are both bisexual subject, and the bisexual's object – presented as a decadent display of available body parts to be devoured by the bisexual gaze, feasted upon with relish as part of a bisexual bacchanalia.⁸ The bisexual subject and bisexual desire are produced in these images as a site for the fusion of oppositions, particularly sex and gender.

Given these dominant representations of bisexuality as beyond and/or inclusive of male/female and masculine/feminine, it is easy to see how a bisexual femme subject position might be read as a contradiction in terms, if not an impossibility. In the above images, femme or butch figure as incomplete parts of the sexed and gendered bisexual 'whole'. It comes as no great surprise, then, that recent writings by femmes such as Joan Nestle still code bisexuality negatively,⁹ or that as an 'out' bisexual, I am frequently asked by lesbian femmes or butches 'do bisexuals do butch-femme?' The phrasing of the question itself assumes there is no such thing as bisexual butch or femme subjectivity. Even if the answer to the question is 'yes, bisexuals do butch-femme', this is an affirmation of a gender play. Bisexuals are not seen as ontologically gendered, as able to be butch or femme.

These dominant representations of bisexuality as 'pseudo-hermaphrodite', androgyne, or polymorphous potential that make a bisexual femme identity difficult to accept in a contemporary queer arena, are, precisely, what link the figure of the femme with bisexuality.¹⁰ In the sexological writings of Wilhelm von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis,¹¹ a female subject is gendered partly in accordance with her sexual object-choice – hence a 'mannish woman' typically desires a feminine woman. The feminine woman she desires, though, presents more of a theoretical problem. If the feminine invert desires masculinity, as she appears to, why is her desire not restricted to men? Havelock Ellis circumvents this indescribability of the feminine invert by rendering her passive (object, not subject, of desire), as well as most open to being 'cured' of her perversion.¹² The feminine invert's ability to be both 'errant heterosexual' and part of a particular class of homosexual is made possible only through a notion of bisexual human potential. Ellis's argument that 'the basis of sexual life is bisexual, although its direction may be definitely fixed in a heterosexual or homosexual direction at a very early period in life'¹³ leaves open the possibility for misguided actions (the feminine invert is not particularly strong-minded) and cure. Within this canonical sexological formulation of the perverted feminine woman, Radclyffe Hall's Mary,¹⁴ to take the classic example, is always destined to be 'subject-in-waiting'. She is bound to be secondary subject to the 'mannish woman', and because she is only legible as (bisexual) 'subject-to-be-cured', her own subjectivity must always be deferred. It is no accident that Mary is presented as childlike in her desire. Mary can become a subject/adult only by making the heterosexual object-choice that has been her destiny from the start. Recent writers have pleaded the case for Mary generally in terms of greater tolerance,¹⁵ as Frann Michel notes, 'Mary is thus represented as essentially passive and becomes the precursor to the negative image of the bisexual woman who leaves her woman love for a man'.¹⁶ I would argue that the writing out of Mary seems to be a sleight of hand enacted by Hall, the sexologists and lesbian literary critics combined.

There is ample textual evidence for reading Mary as actively desiring Stephen (despite the latter's best efforts to ignore this). For example, in one scene where Mary and Stephen almost consummate their desire and love for one another, Mary asserts herself as the desiring agent in the face of Stephen's awkwardness, and inability to express what she wants.¹⁷ And it is Mary's confession of her love for Stephen in Tenerife that finally precipitates the consummation of their lust.¹⁸ It is possible to re-read *The Well of Loneliness* and trace Mary's *unwilling* consignment to heterosexuality, and her resistance to being cast as the (bisexual) 'subject-in-waiting'.¹⁹

Shifting historically to the present, the relationship between bisexuality and femme identity has been coded somewhat differently. Reading heterosexual oppression in part through the rigid codes of femininity women are expected to display and embody, US and UK lesbian feminists such as Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon and Janice Raymond in the 1970s, and Sheila Jeffreys and Julia Penelope in the 1990s, argue for the eradication of 'gender roles'.²⁰ What is particularly interesting to me is the way that lesbian-feminist conceptualization has changed very little over the two decades. Minnie Bruce Pratt, writing about lesbian-feminist politics of the 1970s, sketches the motivation for such conceptualizations of gender as bad:

As women and as lesbians we wanted to step outside traps set for us as people sexed as woman, to evade negative values gendered to us. We didn't want to be women as defined by the larger culture, so we had to get rid of femininity. We didn't want to be oppressed by men, so we had to get rid of masculinity. And we wanted to end enforced desire, so we had to get rid of heterosexuality.²¹

Early US lesbian feminism figures in Pratt's story as the primary challenge to heteropatriarchy through its insistence on both non-femininity and lack of sex with men. Femininity and desire for men are fused, though not, in this case, naturalized. Continuing in the radical feminist tradition of femininity-trashing, Julia Penelope argues emphatically, in the 1990s, that femininity is always about passing as heterosexual and internalized homophobia, and is, thus, barely distinguishable from bisexuality.²² Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, commenting on their contemporary lesbian roles and styles note:

We have found some interesting anomalies in the butch-femme pattern over the years. One which crops up rather consistently is women – usually divorced and, we suspect, not Lesbian at all – who pair up with butch Lesbians. In these partnerships the entire male-female dichotomy is acted out to the nth degree. The femmes insist that their butches wear only male clothing and that they appear and act as nearly like the stereotyped male as possible. . . .

Most of these femmes have been divorced more than once. It appears that they have been so badly treated by men that they can't bear the thought of re-marrying.²³

Martin's and Lyon's repeated reference to 'divorce' in the above passage emphasizes these femmes' bisexual behaviour in terms of relationships with both men and women. Psychically, this bisexual femme is only capable of male/female relations: whether those are actual or transposed onto butch-femme. Martin's and Lyon's bisexual femme confirms the hegemonic link between femininity and heterosexuality, and shores up the

assumption that femininity is always and only ever masculinity's closest relation. The bisexual femme makes real the fear that female/femininity craves male/masculinity for its fulfillment, settling for a butch only when a man is unavailable.

The repeated association of the femme with heterosexuality through bisexuality provokes contemporary femme writers to wrestle the femme from the hands of both the sexologists and lesbian feminists, arguing for femme identity and history as an integral part of lesbian history, rather than its demon in the closet.²⁴ The status of the femme as lesbian is ensured only by detaching her from her 'bisexual' past, it seems. As femme writer Amber Hollibaugh suggests: 'it's absolutely critical to understand that femmes are women to women and dykes to men in the straight world'.²⁵ The femme becomes a contemporary subject by insisting on her absolute difference from the bisexual.

Two: Repudiating heterosexuality, or the 'not-quite-not-straight' femme

Some contemporary theorists have written on butch-femme culture and resistance from a slightly different angle: Teresa de Lauretis, Judith Roof and Judith Butler suggest that femininity and butch-femme cultures are indeed embedded within heterosexual normativity, but not wholly reducible to it.²⁶ I want to focus here on how Butler discusses women in which butch-femme highlights rather than replicates the constructed nature of the heterosexual matrix. In *Gender Trouble* Butler makes her most often cited statement that:

[t]he replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy.²⁷

Butler's theory of what makes butch-femme and drag so potentially subversive is their very closeness to heterosexuality, their making conscious of the mechanism of repudiation in sustaining our identities (though, of course, this is clearer in the 'masculine lesbian' than the femme).²⁸ The masculine woman repudiates 'the feminine', but remains female and thus incongruous to heterosexuality. She does not need the presence of the femme to 'prove' her non-heterosexuality. The feminine woman repudiates 'the masculine', but cannot be read as repudiating heterosexuality unless her masculine female is present. She needs the presence of a visibly non-heterosexual (masculine) subject in order for her repudiations of both masculinity and heterosexuality to make sense.²⁹ Such formation of the subject through repudiation means, of course, that the repudiated other is always hauntingly present. In the Butlerian psychoanalytic scenario, 'mimicry functions as an index of [the 'real'], gesturing towards it, and maintaining a certain contiguity with it'.³⁰ The non-heterosexuality of the femme, since she relies on the presence of the butch for the legibility of her heterosexual repudiation, is particularly precarious. For the femme, with her history of recuperation into heterosexuality (via bisexuality as potential), accessing subjectivity through a repudiation that marks her as 'not-quite-not-straight'³¹ has very specific cultural implications.

Rather than rejecting the established theoretical links between the femme and her heterosexuality, lesbian culture transfigures that relationship in terms of 'myth' – the (lesbian urban) myth of femme abandonment of her butch lover for a man. Pat Califia's femme–butch poetry foregrounds the tension between the myth of femme abandonment and the assumption that she will stay with her butch:

And you can tell she's a femme
Because she makes you cry
When you can't give her everything
You imagine she wants
That a man could give her³²

The butch lover imagines herself lacking in relation to a man; her femme (who is used to this scenario, of course, structured as she is by its confines) 'makes her cry' not by leaving her (she is femme after all) but through chiding her lover for her foolishness. Califia is the femme's champion, acknowledging her bravery and the taunts she receives from 'both sides':

Being a successful femme
Means making a butch desire you
And then enduring when that lust
Turns into suspicion.
'If you want me,' she sneers,
'You must really want a man.'
Nobody knows how much it hurts
When you go out on the street
And straight men tell you
The same damned thing.³³

The 'successful femme' (who is, perhaps, the femme who does not fail/fall into heterosexuality) endures her butch's suspicion, rather than deflects or circumvents it, presumably because she knows that is an impossibility. The poignancy of the poem lies in Califia's astute perception that the straight men's and the butch's readings of the femme must necessarily co-exist. The shadow of Carole-Ann Tyler's grammatical structuring – the femme as not-quite-not-straight³⁴ – lurks between these lines, echoing Califia's earlier sentiment in the same poem that she's 'a sucker' for

... women who can never have what they want
Because the world will not allow them
To be complete human beings – that is, men.³⁵

The structure of this sentiment allows multiple readings. Men are 'the world', that which prevents women having 'what they want'; or, what those women want *is* men, but the

loss of human status attending such desire is too high a price to pay. The spectre of straightness that has always structured the femme is transformed in these poems into an 'operative myth' that enacts Butler's functional mode of repudiation.³⁶ In Califia's poems the unconscious heterosexual object-choice that the femme must necessarily already have made becomes conscious, becomes part of the social and erotic dynamic of the butch-femme play (that both femme and butch are aware of). As a result the femme may become a contemporary subject without having to deny her historical, cultural and grammatical locatedness.

This 'resolution' of the contemporary femme's subjectivity through conscious rather than unconscious repudiation of both opposite-sex object-choice and heterosexual culture helps make sense of why it is that the bisexual femme continues to be a misnomer. Non-heterosexual sites of resistance for Butler are created exclusively by subjects formed through repudiation of opposite-sex object-choice; Califia's femme repudiates the opposite-sex object-choice she has already made. Julia Creet argues that Butler's exclusive focus on lesbian and gay contexts marks less the site of subversion of heterosexuality than it does her own anxieties of 'coming undone'.³⁷ Creet discusses her own attraction to heterosexuality, and reinterprets lesbian and gay insistence on the distinctness of homosexual identity as a political 'defense against re-incorporation into heterosexuality or into the categorization of what might more accurately be called bisexuality'.³⁸

It is only by parodying the notion of bisexual potential that Butler and Califia can make the stereotype of the femme who will always eventually leave you for a man function as 'urban) myth'. The 'myth' functions, in other words, because (we know) the femme will not make the opposite-sex object-choice she is (bisexually) capable of. She is femme precisely because she is read as heterosexual, may even desire men, but finally (unlike Radclyffe Hall's Mary) refuses that object-choice. A bisexual femme, of course, does not necessarily refuse to act on her opposite-sex object-choice, and so calls into question the viability of the femme subject as structured only through that refusal. Acceptance of a bisexual femme subject position, then, would seem to be courting a re-enactment of the structural and personal erasure of the femme just as she is aggressively flirting with dominant cultures in order to secure her own legibility as lesbian, as queer, as a subject in her own right.

Three: Bisexual femme subjectivity and cultural repudiation

What enables femme identity always to be constituted as 'about to abandon' (however parodically) her butch is the perpetuation of bisexuality as only ever a structural phenomenon. I am not suggesting that Califia and Butler are wrong to creatively manipulate particular meanings of bisexuality in order to produce a contemporary femme subject. Bisexuality as sexological and psychoanalytic potential certainly does function as a refusal of femme – historically, politically, and structurally. Indeed, such meanings of bisexuality as sex and gender merged subjects continue to circulate currently. But these are not the *only* meanings of bisexuality available. Bisexuality can also mean desire – whether acted upon or not – for both men and women (and transgendered people).³⁹

Bisexual identity can be taken on as an adult sexual identity rather than pre-Oedipal potential structuring the heterosexual and homosexual opposition. These latter meanings are overlooked in the work of Butler and Califia. I want to pursue a line of argument that imagines the development of a bisexual femme subjectivity as closely associated with, rather than analogous to, lesbian femme subjectivity.

To return to the problematic of Butler's non-heterosexual frames, what kinds of 'parodies' become possible if we imagine bisexual femme as a non-heterosexual subject position that is unable to divorce itself from opposite-sex desire, if, in other words, the 'spectre of straightness' cannot be dismissed? What might the implications for parody be if we consider the almost perfect copy (even down to sexed bodies as well as gender) that bisexuality can make of heterosexuality? What I want to look at in this section are the possibilities opened up by bisexual femme repudiations not of specific sexed (i.e. male) bodies, but cultural repudiations of heterosexuality. I want to explore, in other words, the possibility that non-heterosexuality might be read through something other than same-sex desire, such that bisexual femme subjectivity does not only figure through a (butch) same-sex lover – such that bisexual femme subjectivity can, in fact, figure at all.

Lesbian femme writers of recent years have, of course, been similarly concerned with articulating lesbian femme subjectivity independent of desire for butches. It is not unusual for lesbian femme writers' desire to be sparked by men as well as women. As a way into my exploration of bisexual femme subjectivity I want to look at what happens when the lesbian femme makes the 'myth' of opposite-sex desire into a reality.

Joan Nestle, for example, relishes the erotic component of her relationship with co-ditor John Preston: "Fondest of My Fantasies," he would greet me . . . Dearest Love oddest, Dearest Erotic Icon of My Soul, and finally, Dear Divine Being of My Groin. How could a girl resist?"⁴⁰ A couple of pages later, John Preston speaks of this desire as in no way qualifying the fact that he is 'totally a gay man, attracted to other gay men'.⁴¹ Preston's confidence in this fact textually relies on his lack of desire to have sex with Nestle. Hence he is clear that 'there was never any genital intent', and that with that acknowledgement

there is then room for play, for gentle exploration. I would never seek out a sexual relationship with a woman, but I could also never understand how any man – any human – could not respond to Joan's voice, the sultriness of it, or the romance of dark eyes as they peer deeply into yours.⁴²

What allows this passage to function as an acknowledgement of the desire between John and Joan as not heterosexual, is Preston's emphasis on the non-genital nature of that desire. Both his and Nestle's non-heterosexuality via repudiation of opposite-sex object-choice remains unchallenged by a scene that might initially seem to call same-sex object-choice into question. Both straight and lesbian/gay desire are assumed to reside in the actualization of opposite- or same-sex object-choice – neither writer considers the fact that even straights also desire non-genitally sometimes.⁴³ For Nestle and Preston, the writing of their (opposite-sex) desire here only serves to reinforce the fact that they 'are so clear that each of us is devoted to the work and love of our own gender'.⁴⁴

In *Public Sex*, Pat Califia ruminates on the reasons she does not call herself bisexual, even though she does have opposite-sex sexual partners:

Why not simply identify as bi? That's a complicated question. . . . A self-identified bisexual is saying, 'Men and women are of equal importance to me.' That's simply not true of me. . . . [W]hen I turn on to a man it's because he shares some aspect of my sexuality (like S/M or fisting) that turns me on despite his biological sex.⁴⁵

Here Califia's opposite-sex desire is coded as not central to her lesbian identity. Her opposite-sex encounters are marked by some factor other than biological sex, such as the man's sexual practices (that mark him as deviant, often to gay male culture as well), and his own attachment to a gay identity:

I know that a gay man who has sex with me is making an exception and that he's still gay after we come and clean up. In return I can make an exception for him because I know he isn't trying to convert me to heterosexuality.⁴⁶

Califia's non-heterosexual desire is clearly partly inscribed through cultural repudiation. She has 'eroticized queerness, gayness, homosexuality',⁴⁷ and argues that '[i]t is very odd that sexual orientation is defined solely in terms of the sex of one's partners'.⁴⁸ Although it is finally her same-sex object-choices that frame her opposite-sex ones as marginal, as not fundamental to her identity (and resistance), Califia's sense of cultural repudiation in the production and maintenance of her non-heterosexuality, her lesbian identity, suggests a space where bisexual femme subjectivity might begin to articulate itself in non-heterosexual terms.

Lesbian femme desire for masculinity in FTMs or transgendered butches seems particularly to be a focused site for questions around femme subjectivity currently. Debra Bercovitz, in 'Stand By Your Man', discusses the ways in which her sense of self as lesbian femme is challenged by her desire for her increasingly butch/transgendered lover Kris:

My identity as femme was clear to me. But as Kris became more stone, then passed as a man, I realized that not only was I losing my external identity as a lesbian, but my own sense of self became clouded as I related more to Kris's masculinity. . . . I came into my femininity with her, into the full display of my sexy, femme glory. One clear dynamic was my need to give, hers to take. But, of course, not in the straight way.⁴⁹

The history of other butch-femme couples read as straight is clearly extremely important to Bercovitz. It is through this history that she can articulate her lover's struggles as inextricable from her own.⁵⁰ Within the cultural repudiation of heterosexuality, Bercovitz's object-choice can be read as 'same-sex', though in straight contexts it is less certain.⁵¹

Minnie Bruce Pratt's concern about the sexual identity of the femme is in part sparked by her desire for her transgendered lover. Throughout *S/HE*, Pratt articulates concern about the narrowness of sex and gender as categories through which we can understand our sexual desires. Discussing how Brandon Teena's death⁵² was understood as the death of a lesbian rather than a transsexual by a particular lesbian writer, Pratt suggests that:

[t]he writer admits Brandon lived as a man, but she strips him down to prove that he was not. For her, everything has to match – genitals, clothes, pronouns. . . . [s]he decides he is a confused lesbian – her kind of lesbian,

she writes, a butch woman who turns her on, who gets her hot. . . . The writer never mentions he died when he insisted he would chose his own pronoun.⁵³

Given the context (that Teena was 'stripped down' by his attackers before being raped to prove to his lover he was 'female'), Pratt's words fix the lesbian writer as yet again erasing Teena to fit her own desire. Teena is lesbian – we know, because s/he is the lesbian writer's 'kind of [butch] lesbian'. Pratt's critique could be read as highlighting the mis-readings that go on in order to preserve lesbian identity as formed through repudiation of heterosexual object-choice.

So, is Pratt's sense of self as (lesbian) femme formed through cultural or object-choice repudiation? When Pratt and her lover insist that their desire to enter Michigan Women's Festival is legitimate, it is not because they both have female bodies, but because they both are and have been a part of feminist and lesbian culture and history.⁵⁴ Throughout *S/HE*, Pratt traces a personal and political history of her place in and relationship to lesbian and feminist culture. In addition, Pratt's desire is certainly not only for 'women' as that is generally understood. As her (bisexual) friend points out, she is the lover of woman and man in one body,⁵⁵ and her lover is read as alternately man and woman.⁵⁶ Still, Pratt is uncertain: she questions how she might have negotiated her desire and identity if her lover were to have transitioned from female to male, were to have unrecognizably transformed her body to 'his body' – 'perhaps I would have left you when your voice altered and your beard grew and your scent changed'.⁵⁷ In a sense Pratt's femme desire in *S/HE* is for the limits of womanhood (her own as well as her lover's). She is a lover of the female form, of female history and struggle, and so part of her project is to suggest alternatives to where the boundaries of womanhood might be:

I don't want *woman* to be a fortress that has to be defended. I want it to be a life we constantly braid together from the threads of our existence, a rope we make, a flexible weapon stronger than steel, that we use to pull down walls that imprison us at the borders.⁵⁸

Thus, repudiation of opposite-sex object-choice is still an important part of being femme for Pratt, but the boundaries of that same-sex (female) object are no longer assumed to be self-evident. Both Pratt's and Bercuvitz's desires might be written as repudiation of heterosexual culture and as opposite-sex object-choice repudiation, in other words (much like Califia's above).

What interests me is that none of the authors I have discussed above considers bisexuality as an intervention in the current debates about what forms non-heterosexual subjectivity. Even Califia, whose article expressly addresses why she does not call herself bisexual, does not consider what bisexual desire or object-choice might consist of. Her frames of reference are heterosexual acts (that she distances herself from) and 'queer' acts (that she embraces). Yet all the authors open up a way of approaching the 'problem' of bisexual femme subjectivity. Just as Pratt and Bercuvitz emphasize the cultural histories that are combined in the conjunction of (lesbian) femme and transgendered subject, bisexual femme desire might be articulated as first and foremost a cultural repudiation of heterosexuality (that would also bring other such gestures as Pratt's, Bercuvitz's, Califia's and Nestle's into focus).

To stay with the example of femme desire for transgendered or transsexual subjects for a moment, bisexual writer Marcy Sheiner's predominant concern about her relationship

with her transsexual lover, Rob, also surrounds the possibility of its being recuperated into heterosexual culture, mirroring Bercovitz's anxiety almost exactly.⁵⁹ Where the two writers differ, though, is in terms of the site of their potential loss of identity. Sheiner writes:

It was as if his whole body became one giant cock, and I simply became cunt, opening up to receive the energy. . . . Ironically, I felt more female with Rob than I had ever felt with a genetic male. Maybe it was because I was more trusting of a he-who-had-been-she, and could therefore drop my survival skills, allowing myself to become pure, primeval woman. It felt liberating – for awhile. Eventually, of course, there was a price to pay.⁶⁰

The 'price' Sheiner pays is being read externally as heterosexual (in particular by her family), rather than understanding losing her own sense of self because of her object-choice. Her blatant reductionism aside, the issue for Sheiner is how this particular relationship is not heterosexual *even though* it is between a man and a woman, rather than how this relationship is not heterosexual because it is *not* (in terms of sexed object-choice) between a man and a woman. The questions posed by desire for transgendered and transsexual bodies by both lesbian and bisexual femmes are similar: What are the implications of this desire for my sense of self as femme? How is this desire (and sense of self) different from heterosexuality? How do I mark this desire as non-heterosexual? These are certainly not new questions for femmes to be asking, but I want to show how a non-sexual femme subject might answer these questions differently by situating herself as non-heterosexual through the process of cultural repudiation signalled as significant by Sheiner, as well as through specific object-choices.

What is interesting about the conjunction of bisexual femme and FTM is that here we find a coupling that may be read as non-heterosexual through their combined cultural repudiation. Both bisexual femmes and FTMs may have learned, for example, the form and expression of their desire in a lesbian context – in a lesbian butch-femme context more specifically.⁶¹ The way that a FTM-bisexual femme couple make sense of and give meaning to their desire may, in other words, be in reference to lesbian cultural forms and histories, even though the opposite-sex form of their desire might suggest that it resonates more within heterosexuality. For these subjectivities the male-female dynamic which haunts lesbian butch-femme does not need to be banished, can thrive without the relationship always being reduced to heterosexuality.

This approach to the formation of a bisexual femme subject position raises a number of questions. I am aware that what I have chosen to focus on here is the repudiation of heterosexual culture (irrespective of object-choice). In a sense this is to overstate the case in search of (my) bisexual femme legitimization.⁶² A bisexual femme position might also differentiate itself from lesbian culture. I would suggest that a bisexual femme subject position may, in fact, be occupied through vacillating cultural repudiation of both/either heterosexual and lesbian culture, as well as repudiation through sexed object-choices. So that a bisexual femme who views herself as residing within lesbian culture might be understood as differentiating herself via a repudiation of heterosexual culture and lesbian object-choice (if she is in a relationship with a man, say); or repudiation of lesbian culture and heterosexual object-choice (if in a relationship with a woman, say). Thus the bisexual femme may gain meaning through the simultaneous utterances: 'I am a non-heterosexual' and 'I am a non-lesbian'.⁶³

Such positioning of bisexual femme also opens up the possibility that, at points, she

may not be differentiable from lesbian femme, too. In my article on the 'indiscretion' of bisexuality in relation to lesbian identity in Northampton, I argue that it is only through 'naming' that bisexual women's experience becomes experienced as different from lesbian experience.⁶⁴ But, if a bisexual femme is at points distinguishable from a lesbian femme only in terms of her opposite-sex object-choice, can she not simply be accused of appropriation of lesbian femme culture? Such a gesture of blame marks the bisexual femme as 'inauthentic',⁶⁵ and perpetuates the notion that bisexual and lesbian femme are always separate, with the bisexual femme as the copy to the lesbian femme's original. My resistance to marking out bisexual femme subjectivity as only and always separate from lesbian femme subjectivity is, first because this would appear to misrepresent the history of their relationship both historically and contemporarily, and, second, because there are bound to be points where the two subject positions are mutually informative, overlap, or are indistinguishable from one another. These moments do not necessarily involve the erasure of one subject over another.

My attempt in this article to imagine a bisexual femme subject position as a site of non-heterosexual resistance opens up a number of problems as well as possibilities. My attempt to extend the notion of repudiation beyond desire to include culture risks collapsing the two into one another. This move could be read as suggesting that the cultural repudiations of the bisexual femme, or the non-heterosexual subject, are unconscious ones which lead to a bisexual femme or non-heterosexual subjectivity.⁶⁶ In fact, though, I see the bisexual femme's cultural repudiations I have been describing as social and political decisions that allow her to occupy a non-heterosexual subject position and hence offer a conscious parody of Butler's heterosexual frames.⁶⁷ Thus we could see the bisexual femme subject I have been delineating as either a subject who chooses to inhabit non-straight cultural locations, or as one whose subjectivity is formed through both unconscious and conscious repudiations.

This perception of the bisexual femme as an unconsciously formed subject whose cultural repudiations do not directly (in)form her subjectivity can easily turn to the accusation of appropriation. This view of the bisexual femme sees her rejection of straight culture and embracing of lesbian culture as voluntaristic and wilful, as well as conscious. The bisexual femme is thus set up as the 'knowing' subject, who can pick and choose cultures as well as object-choices. What I want to suggest is that a bisexual femme's unconscious repudiation constitutes her as a sexual subject, and that her conscious repudiation constitutes her as a cultural subject. The combination of unconscious and conscious repudiation produces a bisexual femme subject capable of expressing desire and surviving in a heterosexist world. I would argue that there is no meaningful bisexual femme subjectivity that precedes its formation through cultural repudiation. There is no 'bisexual femme' waiting in the wings to take advantage of lesbian femme community, to borrow what is not hers without permission.

It is my hope that such an approach to bisexual femme subjectivity can underscore the contemporary femme desire to signify independent of opposite-gendered same-sexed objects. Bisexual femmes' (and lesbian femmes') mis-matching cultural and object-choice repudiations suggest, perhaps, a different historical and contemporary narrative of femme desire, one where Mary (as the femme who must ever be denied) is no longer a subject-in-waiting, or a failed lesbian femme, but a subject whose complex (and ambivalent) cultural and object-choice repudiations are a central part of non-heterosexual struggle.

Femme Erotic Independence

JEWELLE L. GOMEZ

I worked as a stage manager in New York City, Off-Broadway theatres for a number of years in the 1970s and 1980s, a time when stage manager was still a 'man's' job. I knew only one woman in the union who worked as a stage manager on all of Broadway. Like anything, to do the job you had to look the part – tough, capable, no nonsense. I wore the regulation uniform: jeans, T-shirt, denim shirt over it, sneakers or work boots; the big thing then was Frye boots. The outfit had to be practical because stage managers have to crawl around under and over stuff as much as construction workers. The entire stage crew was, at that time, almost always boys – men who knew they knew more than you even if they didn't. They figured if things got complicated, at least they could punch you out. So you had to look like you could break a two by four with your bare hands or in the case, when I was working a Sam Shepard play, I needed to look like I could lift the front end of a '57 Chevy, because we really had to. I walked the walk, and gave orders that it were an emergency relief project in Bosnia, not a musical that was never going to be reviewed anywhere. On another show I met, for the first time ever, a female lighting designer. And I was her biggest fan, even before we met. There weren't, and still aren't, many full-time lighting designers making a living in theatre; and it was still an unusual sight for a woman in the 1980s. As soon as she walked in I was really in love, because she was wearing the identifying items: jeans, T-shirt under a denim shirt, the boots. But she was really wearing them. She was a butch.

I spent a good part of the pre-production time hoping to get her attention. Trying to act really smart, sensitive, tough, and available all at the same time. No matter what I did I was invisible to her. Days of production meetings, weeks of rehearsals, her every wish was my command; as it should have been between the lighting designer and the stage manager. But she didn't see me at all. Then, just before opening night, I figured it out: I looked just like her, so, beyond my function, she didn't take me in. When opening night arrived, I realized it was probably the last time I was going to see her so I came to the theatre in a quasi-regulation uniform: jeans, denim shirt, but instead of a T-shirt beneath I wore a lacy bra. And full make-up: mascara, eyeliner, eye shadow, blush, lipstick. Nothing ever happened between us, but the prep time was worth the look of light dawning in her eyes as she recognized I was a dyke. A femme dyke. That was an important moment for me; although I didn't have the word for it at the time, I knew right then I was a femme.

In her eyes and in the air between us I recognized something that is at the core of much of lesbian desire. Several years later I read a poem by Cheryl Clarke, 'Of Althea and Flaxie', which illuminated a sexual connection between women that had gone unspoken. The poem was the first writing I ever heard which expressed my sense of femme/butch identities, identities that I easily recognized when the lighting designer and I finally saw each other:

In 1943 Althea was a welder,
very dark
very butch
and very proud
loved to cook, sew, and drive a car
and did not care who knew she kept company with a woman
who met her every day after work
in a tight dress and high heels
light-skinned and high-cheekboned
who loved to shoot, fish, play poker
and did not give a damn who knew her 'man' was a woman.

Althea was gay and strong in 1945
and could sing a good song
from underneath her welder's mask
and did not care who heard her sing her song to a woman.

Flaxie was careful and faithful
mindful of her Southern upbringing
watchful of her tutored grace
long as they treated her like a lady
she did not give a damn who called her a 'bulldagger'.

In 1950 Althea wore suits and ties
Flaxie's favorite colors were pink and blue
People openly challenged their flamboyance
but neither cared a fig who thought them 'queer' or 'funny'.

When the girls bragged over break of their sundry loves,
Flaxie blithely told them her old lady Althea took her dancing
every weekend
and did not give a damn who knew she clung to a woman.

When the boys on her shift complained of their wives,
Althea boasted of how smart her 'stuff' Flaxie was
and did not care who knew she loved the mind of a woman.

In 1955 when Flaxie got pregnant
and Althea lost her job
Flaxie got herself in relief
and did not care how many caseworkers
threatened midnite raids.

Althea was set up and went to jail
for writing numbers in 1958.
Flaxie visited her every week with gifts
and hungered openly for her thru the bars
and did not give a damn who knew she waited for a woman.

When her mother died in 1965 in New Orleans
Flaxie demanded that Althea walk beside her in the funeral
procession
and did not care how many aunts and uncles knew she slept with
a woman.

When she died in 1970
Flaxie fought Althea's proper family not to have her laid out in lace
and dressed the body herself
and did not care who knew she'd made her way with a woman.¹

I especially like Clarke's poem because it insists on the complexity of identification that many of us often are unable to accept, or fail to understand. I also believe it illustrates the ways in which femme/butch identities were the first real manifestation of transgender in the queer community. The idea of what we now call 'gender fuck' was the central element in any femme- or butch-identified woman. The act of moving deliberately between society's prescribed roles, in opposition to the gender categories, even if only in wardrobe, remains a profound political statement. The blurring is not just of the lines between what we wear but ultimately implies a toppling of the barriers to what we can do as women.

The femme of Clarke's poem, Flaxie, is a distinct blend of many things: tight dress, high heels, a woman who also loves to shoot, fish and play poker. She has good manners and is still capable of standing up for her rights both as a daughter and a lover.

It is also significant that this poem is set in the almost twenty years spanning 1943 to 1970, and uses a black, working-class couple as its subject. The poem valorizes the women and their efforts to survive racial and economic oppression. But often the idea of femmes and their butches has been dismissed as low class, something *those* people play at. In actuality, varied interpretations of femme appear in all classes. If upper-class women's interpretation of femme is muted or masked, it doesn't mean that upper-class women don't have femme impulses. By refusing to be muted or – using a more pointed interpretation – by refusing to be assimilated, femmes lead us towards examining just how much class and race privilege have historically made femme/butch identity an outlaw

identity. And, by extension, it becomes clear how similar assimilationist codes made lesbian identity an outlaw identity. One of the prime examples of this is in the recent explosion of publicity around the network television show, *Ellen* created by and starring comedienne, Ellen DeGeneres. After three years on the air, *Ellen* the character and Ellen DeGeneres both came out as lesbians on national television. Ellen's coming out, both personally and her television character, was a celebratory event around the country, and an especially emotional one in small towns where lesbians are rarely seen in the light of day. But as a media figure *Ellen*/Ellen came out not as a femme or butch but androgynous. That ambiguity is certainly a legitimate identity, and just as certainly, it is the more palatable identity to the general society. So *Ellen*/Ellen came out not as a lesbian or a dyke, the specific words that imply female sexuality, but as 'gay', the generalized term that subsumes women's desire under the more acceptable concept of male desire.

Because it has been primarily those who are white, male or male-identified and middle-class who create the theory, politics and imagery of the lesbian and gay movement, women and certainly women of colour must pay close attention to these images. By 'pay attention', I am not suggesting we censor them, but that we recognize how media images, not created by lesbians or not originating within a lesbian feminist politic, affect our power in the world, even when we don't feel touched by them. Positive images of productive lesbian members of society still remain a goal for many lesbian activists, yet 'positive' often translates in the media into one-dimensional, bland, and apolitical. For millions of people who watch prime-time television, *Ellen*/Ellen is now what a lesbian looks like. I don't see myself in that reflection at all.

To have any discussion of femme identity it is important to go back into history a little bit because without history we are often either anxious or complacent. Anxious, because there is an unknown aspect or source of our desire that we haven't looked at that we would prefer to pave over. As we see with trees in the city, the roots always break back through to the surface.

Or sometimes without history we're a bit smug. We convince ourselves we're young, vital, that we're creating new history – what can the dead past matter? The truth is that history doesn't lay down and die, it follows us around every day, altering how we're seen, and how we see ourselves.

Joan Nestle said: 'Butch/Fem women made Lesbians visible in a terrifyingly clear way in a historical period when there was no Movement protection for them. Their appearance spoke of erotic independence . . .'² 'Erotic independence' is the key phrase here. The presence of femme energy implied sexual desire, in a situation where women are not supposed to have desire, and certainly not for other women. In a society that is still nominally ruled by a Puritan-based morality, any expression of sexual desire by a woman is radical in the first breath and seditious even before consummation.

Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold is a collection of interviews with femme/butch couples about life in Buffalo, New York, in the 1940s and 1950s, which reiterates Nestle's earlier assertion. The authors, Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, extrapolate from their respondents' remarks that by refusing to be invisible as lesbians, femme/butch couples 'were at the core of lesbian resistance'.³ Femmes and their butches gave lesbians the visibility that much of society and many lesbians were terrified of.

But in the 1970s many lesbian feminists, in a flight from the exploitation of traditional heterosexuality, denounced anything that looked remotely like patriarchy and in doing so trashed a part of the lesbian community that had made it possible for them to be lesbian

feminists in the first place. Because the movement was just beginning to pull itself out of the closet, there was no really complex analysis of what femme meant, either to those who identified as femme or to the movement overall. Rejection of oppressive roles, and the accessories which marked them, was logical and radical at that time. Paradoxically, without the aggressive demand in the 1970s for freedom from cosmetics and high heels, many of us wouldn't feel as comfortable as we are today in our ability to wear whatever we choose. Without the flannel shirts and coveralls of yesterday, we might not have gotten to the piercings and chiffon today, nor the social/political deconstructions which make us comfortable with them.

Many lesbians were left with deep bitterness about that time. This wholesale rejection of femme- and butch-identified women in the 1970s is not an attitude that is easily banished. During what we have come to call the 'Sex Wars' of the mid-1980s, the sex police struck again. Along with lesbian erotic literature and S/M practices, butch/femme identities were marked by conservative feminists as anti-feminist, imitating oppressive, heterosexual behaviour. Ignoring Audre Lorde's admonition that 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house',⁴ members of the anti-porn movement targeted lesbian activists and writers such as Dorothy Allison and Joan Nestle. In an effort to punish those designated 'incorrect', their livelihoods were threatened by harassment at bookstore readings and calls made to their places of employment to report their 'perverted behaviour'.

These wounds are not easily healed, but they should not be forgotten. In re-examining our history we can learn how deeply and unexpectedly we are affected by oppression and attempt to stay out of the same philosophical traps.

The most important thing we can do in discussing femme life and identity is to stop using the heterocentric dyad as a model for femme/butch relationships and stop buying into sexist stereotypes which attend such a model. We must dispel the idea that all a butch really wants is to be a man and that a femme is the real woman. A butch is a lesbian woman who moves through the world in a way that is distinct from a man or a femme. A femme is a lesbian woman who moves through the world in a way that is distinct from a straight woman. Clinging to heterocentric polarity has made it very difficult for feminists. Those of us who don't want to replicate the same patriarchal models for relationships have worked hard to find the language to include our desire. The male/female model implies a level of exploitation and ignorance that I don't think that most lesbians have wanted. We could just as easily call femme/butch relationships yin/yang, or north/south, or better yet: magnetic. They are the particular expressions of energy and desire, drawing on different histories, impulses and desires. Fortunately this misidentification has not prevented feminist femmes from continuing to take our space and insisting on a re-examination of who we were and are. We don't have to settle for being called fake hets.

We should also remember we can apply femme/butch models to any type of relationship – lesbian, gay or heterosexual – and often come up with parallel behaviours. There are many gay male and het couples who fit easily into the femme/butch model. Try thinking about your parents as a butch/femme couple, not necessarily dad as the butch, or mom as the femme, sometimes it's the reverse. Think about you and your best friend (male or female), or about the relationship between two siblings. Femme/butch interactions are a way of being and a way of relating that grows out of our deepest sense of ourselves and our most intimate desires.

In the poem about Althea and Flaxie their relationship is based on a complexity of desires and interests that is acknowledged and celebrated. It is in the clothing they wear, the signals they give, and the words they dress themselves in. If Althea is a welder who likes to cook and sew and Flaxie likes to dress up and to play cards and fish, it is not just physical tasks we're talking about, we're also implying emotional complexity and availability, a highly developed sense of self and relationship to the world. Not imitation anything.

And both of the women can be identified as independent of one another. Our identity as femmes is an individual set of characteristics that indicate how we experience and move through the world. Although it is most often spoken of within the butch/femme context, 'femme' existence is not dependent on whether or not it is examined in relationship to 'butch'. The particular juxtaposition of characteristics within Flaxie are her own. It is this coming together of unexpected elements in individual women that has always made lesbians interesting to me. I say 'unexpected' because culture has taught us to not expect a woman who likes to wear make-up to also like to fish. Our misogynistic culture has divided and compartmentalized our lives so sharply that both women and men have trouble spilling over into any territory not deemed our own.

For me the erotic tension of being a lesbian lives in that place where unexpected elements come together: the stone-butch woman who knows how to turn a hem, or looks like a little girl when she laughs. Or the high femme with her skirt hiked up as she changes a tire. The tension of where the unexpected comes together is what makes being a lesbian, and being a femme, interesting. It is also what makes being a lesbian a political act. That spilling over into the categories women were not meant to occupy is the transgressive behaviour that can break down the barriers to personal and political liberation.

To many lesbians who are twenty-five years younger than me, this disruption of role expectations may not seem especially radical. After all, others have already cut the path. Lesbians today find that their social or fashion statements, however unexpected, fit in more easily with the almost limitless landscape of culture. But it is crucial to remember that living in certain big cities, many of us have had the privilege of experimentation without ostracism. This is not true for a majority of lesbians and it is important for theorizing and organizing to keep that disparity in mind. Equally important is understanding that just as young dykes are rejecting parental traditions, they are also usually carrying within themselves subtle forms of the same prejudices they are trying to escape.

I'm black, almost fifty, and was raised by a great-grandmother, so history has a strong influence on my perspective. The struggle to create an identity as a lesbian and as a femme may have an urgency for me that it doesn't have for someone younger. That urgency emerges out of very distinct images, behaviour and activism from the past that may not ring as loudly for someone who is twenty-five years old. Nor do they have to. What is valuable is to realize that, even if we feel comfortable, the fight continues for some other woman, someone not too far from us. No matter how simple it may seem for any of us today, feminism taught a great lesson: the struggle to maintain the right to our identity is at the core of all human rights struggles.

Because we live in a sexist society, femmes get much of the negative flack that women in general protested against in the early days of the Women's Liberation Movement. Often lesbians subject ourselves to the same stereotyping we learn from the

culture around us. Some of the stereotypes about femmes keep popping up over the decades:

Femmes want to pass as straight. My response to that is to insist we are in a war for liberation – butches are the front-line troops and femmes are the tactical guerrillas.

Femmes are not smart. All I can ever say to that is duh.

Femmes are weak and helpless. If that were the case there wouldn't be a femme alive today.

Femmes are tricky and devious. Again, successful methodology is never one-dimensional and frontal attack is not always the only approach. Why is it called strategy or subtlety if one person does it and devious if a femme does it?

Femmes are the mothers of us all. There are, of course, femme mothers, but femme is not synonymous with nurturing – ask my cat.

Femmes are the communicators. Implicit in that is that femmes explain butches both to the rest of the world and to butches themselves. Time has shown that butches can explain themselves quite well and that femmes, like all women in a sexist society, sometimes need help in finding our voices.

Femmes are white, blacks are butches. The explicit racism and sexism in this stereotype persists in every lesbian community. It is a defamatory extension of the sexual stereotyping of both African-Americans and of white women.

Femmes are always bottoms and only want to be fucked. If we believed things are always this simple, we could have stayed heterosexual.

Femmes are either high-class or trashy. This is the virgin/whore dichotomy that patriarchy has perpetuated. We may want to eroticize those images but we don't need to believe in them.

Femmes only like to be lovers with butches. For some femmes their attractions may vary, they don't mind fighting for time in the mirror.

Femmes are never satisfied sexually. Sexual fulfilment, just like the way of expressing desire, is as variable as the size, shape and numbers of lesbian hands and dildos.

Femmes are not good friends to each other. This is, to me, the most insidious form of lesbian self-hatred. Every time I have heard it said, it has been by a femme I have been a really good friend to. The world of femmes, like that of all women, is based on sorority. We have to expect it, demand it actually. And where it doesn't occur we need to work on repairing the damage we are doing to ourselves.

A student in a college class recently expressed her anger about any discussion around femme/butch identities. She felt she was being forced to make a choice, to be one or the other. I was puzzled and asked where and when someone had put a gun to her head. I think that sometimes we yearn to have a space we are comfortable in and at the same time, we chafe against it. My identifying as a femme does not presume that all women have to accept an identity as either butch or femme. It is one place to begin the discussion of lesbian desire, and an invitation to others to explore the specifics of who they are, not a demand that they mirror me.

Variety is part of the excitement. Growing up as a girl I lived in reaction to society's demand that I be a female in a 'femme' way. That direct and indirect training was part of what spurred me into breaking away and becoming a stage manager. In making that break I discovered the difference not just between myself and heterosexual women, but also between lesbians. These are what create the tension and the excitement. The ability and willingness to explore our differences, not just our similarities, are part of what

creates a solid community. Although I have become a female in a femme way it is not at all what society expected.

Audre Lorde said, 'There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us . . .'⁵ The link Audre Lorde makes between the erotic and power is at the heart of lesbian life and liberation. My identity as a femme is one of my ways of expressing my power as a black woman and as a lesbian. Today, in the time of mass-marketed, lesbian glossy magazines and gender studies, lesbians still need as many different methods of access to empowerment and liberation as we can find. The door might be opened by a poem or by a silk scarf. How can we not embrace this power? How can we not embrace ourselves?



Christine King and Treva Offutt in *Bones and Ash: A Gilda Story*, by Jewelle L. Gomez. Urban Bush Women Theatre Company, New York, 1997. (Cylla Von Tiedmann)

Girl Talk: Femmes in Discussion

LOUISE CAROLIN WITH CATHERINE BEWLEY

This essay has emerged from a series of 'dinner party' discussions between a small gathering of femmes who began to meet in London in the summer of 1995. For the purpose of this project we met again, formally, as a smaller, more focused group, and taped our conversations in order to produce an ethnographic study of a small group of self-identified femmes. As authors, Catherine and I also took part in the debate, partly in order to direct the discussion towards issues we felt were particularly interesting and relevant, and partly in order to contribute our own opinions and ideas. As participant observers in this process our position is passionate and partisan; we do not claim to approach the subject of femme identity from an unbiased standpoint. We are white, British-born, middle-class and aged in our early thirties; Catherine from a Northern working-class background, Louise raised in London of a mixed British and European family. These are all factors which we recognize will influence our approach to, and analysis of our subject. As contributors to this book, our position is similarly ambiguous. We write not as members of an academic institution, but as members of a butch/femme community, and our primary alliance is with the femmes (and butches) whose cooperation and support made this piece of work possible.

The first 'Femmes Dinner Party' was never meant to be inclusive of all femmes: it was a private event, organized by Catherine within a close circle of contacts. Having said that, surprisingly, most of the femmes present did not know each other beforehand. Bringing a group of femmes together made us visible, acknowledged our separate identity and suggested we had something to share with each other, independent of our contact and relationships with butches. It also enabled femmes who go out with other femmes to feel comfortable in coming, that their desire would be acknowledged. As with most community development, the femmes network was, and is, a process which starts with personal contacts and extends outwards.

The group we involved in this chapter included femmes in their twenties, thirties and forties, of varied class backgrounds and family histories, who work in a variety of jobs and careers. Participants included black and white women; British and foreign, but living here. Some are into butches, some into femmes and some into both. A few identify as SM dykes. All of us live in London at present, although most originate elsewhere. Nevertheless, in spite of this variety, we are not a representative group. We hope the discussion will continue and expand to be more inclusive as time goes on.

We invited a core group of femmes to come to two discussion meetings to talk about femme life. Some came to both; others were not able to come to either and so were interviewed separately. We guided the discussion with some questions but it also took on its own character and flow. Meetings were taped and transcribed, so that those attending would have the chance to reflect on what they said and comment further on it. We also made an agreement about confidentiality, which we hoped would enable our

participants to speak freely and with confidence on subjects which were often intensely personal to them. However, it is important to note that the 'dinner party' environment in which these conversations originated inevitably coloured the kinds of questions and answers which characterize the discussion. A different group of femmes, in a different setting, for example a pub or a dance-party, would certainly have provided us with different answers – and questions.

Britain has a strong tradition of butch and femme lives but there has been little public discussion by butches or femmes based here about ourselves. We have not told our own stories. We have not asked if there are uniquely British contexts for our lives and identities. We have not talked publicly with each other, let alone anyone else, about what it is like to be butch or femme living in Britain in the 1990s. This essay hopes to be a start, albeit a limited one, to this discussion. Our focus is small and specific because that is what we could achieve at this moment. Nevertheless, we hope the conversation between this small group of femmes is provocative enough to get others talking and telling their own stories, from their own perspectives. We were as keen to discover differences and diversity amongst femmes as we were to discover similarities. We have no 'answers' to any of these issues. What we want, and hope we have achieved, is a thought-provoking beginning to talk in Britain by and between femmes, about our own lives.

Writing our histories

It is one of the contradictions of British femme experience that the body of literature about butch/femme lives available to us is almost entirely North American in origin. While texts like Joan Nestle's *The Persistent Desire* and *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*,¹ which chronicle American working-class bar culture of the 1950s and 1960s, have been incredibly important and influential to some British femmes, we are left in the odd situation of knowing very little of our own separate cultural inheritance. The same is true of 1990s butch/femme experience. With the exception of a few television documentary contributions (e.g. *Butch-Femme*, and *Storm In A Teacup*²), we have very little material evidence of the impact of butch/femme lives on lesbian culture in Britain, now or then. In fact, on a visit to this country's Lesbian Archives, then housed at the London Women's Centre, several years ago, Catherine was surprised to discover that the terms 'butch' and 'femme' were not even recognized under the filing system. Ironically, it may even be the case that the attentions of anti-butch/femme commentators, like the British lesbian feminist academic Sheila Jeffreys,³ have done more to keep butch/femme identities on the national public lesbian agenda than butches and femmes have achieved themselves.

More recently, the media fascination with so-called 'lesbian chic', while replicating certain butch/femme imagery (for example k. d. lang and Cindy Crawford's infamous 1993 *Vanity Fair* cover) has largely invisibilized lesbian reality. Titillating images of sexual deviance apart, the recurring theme in the accompanying text was often the distancing of pretty, glamorous young women from crop-headed, cigar-smoking butch stereotypes.⁴ Apart from the apparently startling revelation that some lesbians wear lipstick, the lesbian chic phenomenon ignored real lesbians, both butch and femme, focusing instead on 'straight girls faking it'.⁵ While it has been suggested that by reclaiming lesbianism and dressing it up in a frock, the media has somehow increased the acceptance of femme



Steelhead (Shonagh Adelman, 1996)

style in the lesbian community, the femmes we spoke with felt that the interest in 'lesbian chic' had actually done little to rescue femme dykes from the margins of lesbian subculture, translating in a lesbian context as 'Butch girls in lipstick' (Melissa Jo).

Even femmes who choose relationships with other femmes rather than butches, and who might have been expected to feel they had in some ways benefited from the higher profile bestowed on them by 'lesbian chic', professed irritation and insisted that as a pair of femme dykes, without the visual signifier of the butch, they remain invisible in the public eye:

We'll go into a pub [and] I guarantee you that within five minutes there will be some disgusting man who will come up to Jennie and offer to buy her a drink, and completely ignore me. They see me as the sad chubby friend that's invisible because they're trying to hit on my girlfriend. (Amy)

The histories we heard from our participants varied enormously from woman to woman; some felt they had 'always' been femme; some looked back on early lives which showed no hint of femme leanings. For many of us it will always be more complicated:

Looking back at photos of myself [as a child] – there's this real stropky femme look, this stropky, top femme, snarling pout thing! [But] I remember being on a bus once when I was about sixteen and everyone was having a big argument behind me about whether I was a boy or a girl, and in the end they decided I was male because of my moustache, and because I used to wear men's suits. And to me it wasn't butch really. . . . It wasn't femme, but it wasn't butch. (Aisha)

I've got a great photo of me on the beach in France, [in] these little blue jeans . . . and a little white top. I had blonde curly hair when I was quite little, and I'm standing with my hands in my pockets and I look so butch! I think there's this little butch in me as well [still]. There are aspects of me that are so masculine and there's so much maleness in me that I suppose it's odd that I call myself a femme, but I am a femme. (Max)

It would be easy to fall into the trap of evaluating authentic 'femme-ness' on the basis of a childhood penchant for pink frills and powder, and this is in fact a recurring theme in certain anthologies of femme writing.⁶ Interestingly, Joan Nestle herself, internationally considered a femme role model, has described herself in the 1950s as walking the streets 'looking so butch that straight teenagers called me a bull-dyke'.⁷ However, she explains, this did not disrupt the authenticity of her femme performance in the gay bars she frequented at night. Femme identity is clearly less fixed in heterosexually defined notions of femininity than the common stereotypes dictate. None of our participants worried that they might not be 'real femmes' in spite of their tomboy childhoods or gender-ambiguous teenage explorations. Max and Aisha's assertions serve to underline the fact that femme understanding of gender identity is, at different moments, both firmly nailed to traditional understandings of masculinity and femininity, and more sophisticated and complex.

The drama of being a femme: appearance and performance

Identity is not just about appearance, but we all express who we are to some extent through what we look like. Who we are, though, is not just butch or femme; it also reflects the other influences on our lives, and the options include class, ethnicity, culture, age, jobs, the music we like, our hobbies, what is acceptable or not in the community around us, and the era we live in.

Nevertheless, appearance is an overwhelmingly important framework through which femmes are defined and define themselves. The word 'femme', like the word 'butch', is often used as an adjective, to describe how someone looks or behaves: 'you're looking so butch', 'I'll be the femme and make tea'. This doesn't mean that these people *are* butch or femme as an identity. But femme to us is a noun, it says who you are, and not necessarily how you look.

For femmes, the issue of recognition of our identity, the visibility or invisibility of it, becomes intimately tied up with appearance. 'I grew my hair, painted my nails and discovered my femme identity' is a clear message in much that has been written.⁸ For many British femmes, this is not how it is. The Femmes Dinner Parties and the essay discussion group deliberately included femmes who do not look stereotypically femme, but who identified as femme.

I remember looking at other people at the first one [Dinner Party] and feeling really shocked that some of the people who were there would consider themselves femme. Which is great because it really blew my expectations and it shows what a broad range of femininity there is. (Melissa Jo)

The 'visibility/invisibility' question is about more than passing as 'straight' on the street. First, this 'passing as straight' is going to mean different things for femmes of different ages and lifestyles, at different periods in history. How to 'pass as straight' might differ for a nineteen-year-old and a fifty-five-year-old, as styles and fashions for heterosexual women differ. Passing as straight does not just mean having long hair: it is also about whether your look is consistent with popular styles for women of your age. To pass or not to pass means to be 'read' as straight by others and all of us are using popular cultural stereotypes to do this. And the issue is not just about being 'read' as straight or gay but as femme:

I think it's very difficult for us to advertise our sexuality. It is nearly impossible for us to go out on the street and people to say, there's a femme lesbian. (Max)

Femmes hold these stereotypes too, and do not always 'read' each other: they might read some femmes as straight, and some as lesbian but not femme. This is particularly the case for those femmes who do not look stereotypically 'girly', or feminine. Likewise, the 'girly' look is not universally owned by femme dykes: lesbians of all sorts can look 'girly' but not be femmes.

Some femmes will be invisible as lesbians in many of the contexts in which they mingle. At work, for example, they might not fit colleagues' stereotypes about lesbians. Other femmes will be visible as lesbians, in that they fit stereotypical images of lesbians, or are read as such by others, but they might not be read as femmes. Many femmes say that their femme-ness is only recognized when they are with a butch. But what about when we are not with a butch, and what about those femmes who go out with other femmes?

The first dinner party was a bit worrying because I suppose although I didn't have any insecurities about being a femme, I was aware that I don't look very much like most people's idea of a femme. I tended to rely on the visual sense that I had a very butch girlfriend, which I couldn't very well do in a gathering of femmes. (Louise)

All the participants felt comfortable and happy with their identity as femmes, even if there were difficulties proving it to some group or other. Nevertheless, most femmes are invisible in one context or another. What is important is that we see this for the complexity that it is. As one participant said:

I've never really thought about conveying a message that I'm a femme. I just do it because that's what feels good. It feels a very integrated thing. . . . It feels a part of me like any part of me: my Asian-ness, my Italian-ness, or my London background. It's all merged together. (Aisha)

A second theme about femme identity which came out strongly in our discussions revolves around femme as performance: the drama of being a femme. To go out as a femme into the world means a performance of style, whatever that style is and whomever we do it for. Whether this drama is low-key or loud, part of what makes a femme is her own, individual performance of being a femme, performances which vary depending upon her background and which female icons she turns to for inspiration. Amongst our participants these varied from screen idols like Doris Day and Marlene Diétrich, to comic-book heroine Tank Girl and 1960s sitcom star Elizabeth Montgomery of *Bewitched*. We draw on general social traditions in which women dress up for their men and also specific gay traditions, such as camp and drag. There is a way in which a femme 'performs' being a femme: knowing the resonance of what she wears and how she presents herself. There is much more irony and humour in femme performance than critical lesbian feminists ever acknowledged:

Femmes were always thought to be too brain-washed to understand what they were doing with their bodies. I think in fact we understood better than anyone: we understood the reaction we got from our partners; we understood the heads that turned, even as lips tut-tutted when we walked into clubs and bars; we understood our ability to take other people's fantasies and feel powerful with them; we understood, and lived with, the reaction we got on the streets. And we still do. (Kate)

But femmes also talked about how this performance did not always create a simple response in other lesbians, even indeed in other butches and femmes. For example, Aisha described how her look actually put others off, as if a femme in high performance mode is too powerful or too scary. Some ultra-femmes also talked about how it has become increasingly difficult to go to lesbian clubs and bars in high-femme mode because of the lack of respect and safety these venues afford them. At present there are no women-only fetish clubs in London and the mixed gay SM scene is characterized by a strict dress code of 'leather, rubber or camouflage' which many femmes feel militates against the expression of their femme identity. This contrasts with the lesbian bars and sex clubs of the late 1980s, which they felt glorified femmes for being as 'ultra' as they dared.

My experience is that no one ever wants to pick me up looking ultra-femme. I think they're terrified of me, which is what I want! I don't know if I can look androgynous now I've got long hair, but if I keep the DMs on and go for trousers and something more toned down, people are going to flirt with me more. It's a completely interesting experience. It's very odd. I think it might be a race thing too. I think they get intimidated, so I'm told. (Aisha)

In her ultra-femme drag, Aisha challenges her 'audience' of potential lovers on two counts: as a lesbian who is acting out and manipulating cultural myths of the phallic woman, hyper-feminine and sexually voracious, and as a bi-racial woman of Asian appearance

who is defying her meekly feminine ethnic stereotype. As a femme top, Aisha is happy to exploit the power she derives from this performance, but it was a frustration common to other participants, that the 'better' their display of femme identity and desire, the less likely they were to be recognized as lesbian, let alone picked up.

Femmes talked about molding their appearance to bring more or less attention to themselves and to help them feel more powerful in a particular situation. This included contexts on the street, on holiday and at work:

When Chris and I go on holiday I don't wear bright red lipstick or really tight clothes. I don't advertise myself in the same way that I do in this country because I don't want the attention. Because once I've got it for myself people will then notice the two of us, two women together, and then we've got 'You're a lesbian', and there's grief then. I will consciously dress down and not be femme. I will look what I term more straight, ordinary. (Max)

In Max's opinion, femme identity is directly signified by flamboyant display. The connection she makes between 'straight' and 'ordinary' prompted laughter and agreement from our participants. For many of us, the confusion of femmes with straight girls is a senseless anathema which invisibilizes our appropriation and manipulation of feminine *power* and marginalizes femininity in lesbian communities. Furthermore, this mistaken equation plays into simple-minded assumptions of masculine dominance and agency as desirable and authentic lesbian attributes.⁹

The femmes in our group also spoke about how their appearance changed as they got older, reflecting changes in lifestyles, changes in career and jobs, children, being in and out of relationships, and changes in their bodies and how they felt about them. Another reason was safety. Needing to get a tube train at night by yourself, with a mile walk at the other end, made femmes think twice about their mini-skirt and high heels.

Our discussion about appearance raised many complicated issues. Appearance becomes a process which each femme adapts and develops as she goes through her particular life. There is no one femme way of looking, although in order to identify each other we must constantly ask ourselves what a femme looks like, what a femme aesthetic might be.

Identity is also about how we see ourselves, in our historical, cultural and social contexts. And this gets acted out in how we relate to other people and how they see us:

A few years ago I was washing dishes with my mother and her friend. We were talking about tomboys and I was horrified to discover that both of them thought of me as having been one! Shocked, I demanded that they define what they meant. I was interested to learn that they thought of a tomboy as a girl who knows what she wants and is determined to get it. To them, my athleticism and self-confidence meant that I fit into that category. (Melissa Jo)

Stereotypes about femme are closely linked to stereotypes about femininity. However, neither stereotype actually describes femme experience. There were quite different views between participants about how 'femme' and 'feminine' linked, but we all agreed that femmes, as a group, are not passive people.

A lot of the things you read about femmes [say] that femme is passive, it's soft, it's gentle, it's welcoming, it's nurturing and so on. Now, I have all those qualities in me but it's not what I think femme is. Because femme to me is incredibly strong. You have to be to get through the shit you have to put up with, both from our own lesbian community and also out on the street. We're all incredibly strong people. We're not passive people. My femme-ness is incredibly powerful. It's very, very strong and it's very, very angry at times.

(Max)

Max's comment perfectly articulates the feeling of many femmes that our identity as feminine-identified lesbian women in no way lessens our sense of our own agency. In fact, it serves to strengthen it, because in a society which values so-called masculine attributes at the expense of the feminine, we are constantly at odds with ideologies dominant in wider society and our lesbian communities. In our minds, therefore, the concept of femme is deeply connected to the experience of struggle, as well as the power and pleasure we derive from our performance of outrageous femininity.

Femme sex and sexuality

What is 'femme' if it's not about appearance? If it's not about femininity, what is it about? It's got to be about sexuality, hasn't it? (Louise)

Contrary to the assumptions of many butches and other non-attendees, conversation at the Dinner Parties did not consist solely of sexual gossip. Even in the relatively safer and more focused arena offered by the discussion group for this chapter, it took us until the second session to raise the subject. We can suggest two reasons for the apparent reluctance of the group to explore notions of femme sexuality, the most tangible of which was the protectiveness women felt towards their sexual partners. In a small community of lesbians whose social relationships overlap constantly, the importance of preserving the confidentiality of other individuals is paramount. Although some women were unfamiliar with each other's social circles, at least two of the participants had more than one sexual partner in common.

There may also, at the Dinner Parties, have been an element of not wanting to tread on each other's toes over a sensitive subject. The obvious question 'What do femmes do in bed?' is potentially more fraught than the issues of appearance or behaviour, and the diversity and variation within the group was possibly even more extreme. However, once the discussion was underway another thing holding us back seemed to be the difficulty of defining our terms. Although there was much commonality of opinion and experience, there was also a lack of consensus over the most minor points. Particularly difficult to establish was the impact of the butch/femme dynamic on different sexual practices, as the following exchange demonstrates:

I think that's what comes out of most literature about butch/femme sex, that it's more than just in your head. And the reasons . . . why people identify as butch or femme are not just about what's in their heads, but about what's natural for them. (Max)

So you're saying that in most literature there's a certain butch way of having sex and a certain femme way of having sex. They might do it differently and it means different things to them. But what's interesting is that two people could like the same thing, being done to them or doing it to someone else, but . . . even in that context there is a butch/femme dynamic. (Kate)

The only way [there would be] a butch/femme dynamic is if it was agreed. (Jane)

This dialogue illustrates our problems with a debate which recurs amongst members of butch/femme communities: to what extent are butch/femme personality and behaviour 'natural', inherent or unconscious, and to what extent are they a conscious construct of the principal players? In our discussion of butch/femme sexual practice these issues quickly asserted themselves as a barrier to fruitful communication, indicating that opinion was divided, even in individual participants! Femme sex, our femmes seemed to declare, was more about attitude than any particular act(s). It was generally agreed that performing penetration is no longer the province of butches in butch/femme sex, and that 'stone' or untouchable butches are unusual. It appears, from our discussions, that butch/femme sex is no longer characterized by a focus on the femme's orgasm as aim and object (if it ever really was). Having infiltrated the butch/femme bedroom, the 1970s lesbian feminist 'you-do-me-then-I'll-do-you' school of sex governs our sexual expectations far more than accounts from the texts of yesteryear. Similarly, our participants agreed with us that modern notions which dispel the association of butch and femme with dominant and submissive sex roles have done much to change our sexual experience as femmes. Increasingly, what we do in bed is up for negotiation.

Our discussions confirmed that many more femmes have sex with other femmes than is generally recognized in the literature available to us. (In fact none of our participants had confined herself solely to sexual relationships with only butches or only femmes.) While butch/femme sexual practice may be said to replicate a recognizable 'heterosexual' dynamic, how is femme/femme sex different from 'ordinary' lesbian sex, if at all? And what of femme 'tops'; is their femme-ness compromised by their sexual dominance or does this argument only confuse femme with traditional concepts of submissive femininity?

Aisha commented on the destructiveness and inaccuracy of the common saying, 'butch in the streets, femme in the sheets' (and vice versa), which she felt equates femme sexuality with passivity. In general, our participants did not feel that this is a useful model for analysing butch/femme sexuality, or one that reflected their experience as femmes:

[I have read about] a woman who said she was nearly always a dominant, the instigator, initiator, all those sorts of things, but when a butch came along she loved giving it up completely. And I think, whichever position you might be in at whichever moment, you can still maintain that femme-ness, whether you're ultra-dominant or completely giving in to them. (Aisha)

Femme sexuality is flexible, and our discussions demonstrated that some femmes are as at home on the business end of a strap-on dildo as they are being fucked, although the actual performance might differ:

It's [hard to explain] that when a butch wears a strap-on and waves her cock around and does all the things that men might do, it's nothing to do with men or masculinity. When I do that, it has nothing to do with the way a butch would do it. It's a sense of irony perhaps, a sense of play. (Melissa Jo)

This assertion, however, prompted disagreement about the extent to which butch identity is tied up with concepts of masculinity, with some femmes feeling that butch identity is often very much an overt play on particular styles of masculine sexual performance, and arguing that this was intrinsic to what they saw as butch sexuality.

Femmes in relationships

As femmes we often find ourselves defined by our relationships. If we choose sexual involvement with butches, it is assumed that the relationship is characterized by the presence and identity of the butch, perhaps because stereotypes current both amongst lesbians and wider society dictate that butches are more authentically lesbian than femmes. However, our discussions made it clear that the personal identity and appearance of individual femmes are equally relevant in the public and private recognition of their relationships as butch/femme. Some of our participants felt that it was they, as overt femmes, who defined their relationships as butch/femme, visually or otherwise, and others agreed that their partners did not consider themselves particularly butch, or were uncomfortable with the connotation of butch/femme 'roles':

Chris is recognized as a dyke but some people would just see this, they wouldn't necessarily see her as a butch until they see her with me. It's me as a femme, and what I look like, that makes our relationship visually butch/femme, as an icon. (Max)

... my current girlfriend is what is known, apparently – she hates this term – as a dysphoric butch. This is according to someone who writes about butches in America, I have to add. Basically, she's comfortable with being seen as a butch, but she certainly doesn't like it in the context of being seen with a femme. Partly, I think, because she's older [than me] and she doesn't want to be seen as the older more powerful one with her little girly in tow, which of course I'd love! (Melissa Jo)

Max, when coming out as lesbian in the 1990s, although consciously drawn to butches, was confused by a widespread assumption that femme lesbians should form relationships with other femmes, and butches with butches; that butch and femme were, in effect, two different coexisting species of dyke. Max's description of the visual impact of her ultra-femme stance, when coupled with that of her recognizably lesbian butch partner, suggests that perhaps in the 1990s, when the prevailing image of lesbian couples is of women connected by 'sameness', butch/femme couples confound the expectations of both heterosexuals and other lesbians by presenting themselves in masculine/feminine 'roles'. While Chris is keen to be read as butch, and revels in the contrast she makes with Max, Melissa Jo's partner is disturbed by the picture they present. It is relevant to remember here that many people, straight and gay, consider the

concept of butch/femme dated and negative, and that, despite the 'lesbian chic' furore, the prevailing image of a 'lesbian' still draws on ideas of butchness and/or androgyny.

While Melissa Jo suggested that butch/femme identities might help prevent the 'merging' that often appears to happen in long-term lesbian relationships by creating a 'healthy distance . . . a sort of separateness', others thought that even butches and femmes, where the dynamic of difference is writ large, visually and sexually, may inevitably gravitate like to like. Here Max describes the need to differentiate in the imperative tense, as something which she and her partner *must do* in order to maintain their roles within the relationship: 'In terms of our characters and the way we are, we're both incredibly similar. We *have to define* what's butch and what's femme . . . between us' (our italics). Interestingly, this seems to contradict her earlier assertion that butch and femme identities are about 'what's natural for them'. But perhaps her comment simply indicates that in the 1990s butch/femme roles are as negotiable as straight gender roles, that the changing expectations of men and women affect the butch/femme dynamic.

Many of the femmes we spoke to felt that there were potential challenges for enduring butch/femme relationships, which would not occur during a brief affair, because of the emphasis on the performance of roles. When you find yourself living with a butch partner, we asked ourselves, is it less easy to ignore the fact that she is a woman? Would you want to? These are complex questions to answer, ones which we could only begin to address in the discussions.

While some participants were adamant that their butch lovers were simply 'another kind of woman' to themselves, some saw butches as psychologically and biologically different, placing them on a continuum with transgendered people. These femmes do not necessarily consider themselves 'lesbians'. Lesbian is, after all, a term we use to describe women who are sexually and emotionally attracted to other women. For some feminine women who find themselves attracted to the gender ambiguity of people who, while biologically female, do not conduct themselves conventionally as women and choose to identify themselves with behaviours which society identifies as 'masculine', the only available label may be 'femme'.

From the other end of the femme spectrum, women who go out with other femmes speak up for the liberation they experience in relationships free from what they perceive as the inherited stereotypes of butch/femme partnerships:

It's about making up your own rules. That's what I find so exciting about going out with another feminine girl, that all the stereotypes . . . just don't exist because we make our own rules. Even in things like sex. The classic joke is, 'What do two femmes do in bed? Not a lot, while they're waiting for the other one to make the first move.' Which is wrong, you know, that's so untrue! (Amy)

Community and isolation: finding the femme network

As we noted in the introduction, many of the femmes who came to the Dinner Parties did not know each other beforehand, and yet, Dinner Party invitations had been sent to femmes through a word-of-mouth network. This suggests that femmes do know other

small networks of femmes but tend not to meet as a group or, if we meet in other social situations, we do not recognize or acknowledge our identity explicitly with each other.

It wasn't until the Dinner Parties that I really met self-identifying femmes. So I was very excited about it all. I thought, oh wow, finally I'm going to meet other femmes. (Max)

Our femmes talked about the enjoyment – and sometimes the competition! – they felt around other femmes: 'It's a bit of solidarity and it's . . . a joyous thing to see femmes enjoying going for it' (Aisha). But many participants related painful stories of exclusion from dyke gatherings because they did not look stereotypically lesbian. Although this is something femmes have been experiencing for years, it is still happening.

However, again, this is not just about appearance. With the development of diverse lesbian 'looks', femme identity can be even harder to establish. For example, one participant, Kate, worked behind the bar in a popular lesbian nightclub. She had some dyke clubbers questioning why a straight woman, as they assumed, was working there, and others criticizing butch women at the club to her, thinking she was a 'lipstick lesbian' who was anti-butch/femme. Despite stereotypically femme appearance on both occasions, Kate was first not 'read' as a lesbian and then not 'read' as a femme. Is femme identity so difficult for other lesbians to recognize?

The resurgence of interest in butch and femme identities in Britain in recent years has not necessarily supported those of us who have been living these lives for many years and decades. It has not necessarily broken the myths about butch and femme lives or, from a femme point of view, raised our profile. As Melissa Jo says, 'Although on the surface things are freer, it's almost like that freedom has dissipated a community, so you can feel very, very isolated.'

Conclusion

When Catherine and I began to discuss our experience and desire as femmes, back in 1993, our lives were very different from now. In the intervening years we moved from Manchester to London, changed jobs, began and ended long-term relationships, entered new social circles, made new femme friends, initiated the Dinner Parties, and kept on talking, talking, talking with each other. Undertaking the research for and writing of this essay has been a fascinating experience, although not without its frustrations. I suspect that our own familiarity with each other's history and ideas led us to expect a level of dialogue between our participants which was perhaps unrealistic, given the circumstances.

The femmes we invited to the discussion group are confident, articulate and opinionated people, but we feel that worries over confidentiality and the novelty of the conversation meant that we did not always find the answers we hoped for or, indeed, any answers at all. For example, we found it very difficult to establish the impact of race and class identities on our femme identities. Catherine and I each understand our identities as femmes to be strongly embedded in our family histories and class experience, but the (middle-class) femmes we interviewed appeared to find our questions either irrelevant or unanswerable. We suppose that their reticence was due more to the newness of a concept which has not been much written of than to a real lack of interest.

With hindsight, new questions present themselves which we are unable to answer. We never asked about participants' experience (or not) of heterosexuality and how this affects their femme performance, or what is distinctive about femme desire. We never got to the bottom of the relationship between femme and femininity (although certain conclusions arise). And we did not discuss the distinction between femme practices and femme identity.

Many readers will notice inconsistencies in this piece of work, which I hope will not undermine its validity for them. I believe they serve to reflect the ambiguities expressed by the femmes who took part in this project, and ours as writers, and that these ambiguities and contradictions are every bit as telling and significant as the certainties we shared. This essay should not be taken to represent all British femme experience. There are many femmes whose lives and opinions are not described here. We hope that it will not be long before these women have an opportunity to be heard.

I am certain that another factor which dominated the discussions was the desire of our femmes to bond with each other, to find common ground in spite of our differences. Therefore, our conversations tended to emphasize similarities and there may have been an element of self-censorship at work. My own experience was that, in spite of my desire to find commonality with all kinds of femmes, I realized that my opinions and self-knowledge sometimes brought me into direct conflict with the opinions and self-knowledge of others:

One thing that really annoys me is when femmes say their identity comes through being with a butch. If you have to define yourself through the existence of another human being then something's really wrong. You know, that isn't liberation. That isn't being who you are. I just completely disagree with it and I don't think it's empowering to femmes at all. (Amy)

Amy calls herself 'a true girlie-girl' and chooses relationships with other femmes. For her, the outward expression of her feminine self is what makes her a femme. I am an ex-skinhead Tank Girl-type who desires butches. My attitude to my own femininity is far more ambivalent; my understanding of myself as femme is connected more to my sexuality than my appearance. Where is the common ground for Amy and me? Are we really both femmes, or is one of us something as yet unnamed?

It should also be remembered that we were sometimes investigating huge subjects with complicated ramifications, and that much time and energy was spent on defining our terms. Additionally, the confidentiality issue caused ongoing problems, particularly regarding our discussion of sexuality, and some participants experienced difficulties where we had quoted them talking about their partners. There were times when we as authors felt overwhelmed by the issues we were trying to explain; both by their complexity and their simplicity. 'I don't know why we're writing this down', said Catherine at one point. 'It's all so obvious.'

However, it has always been our conviction that femme experience and knowledge have something to teach women, particularly feminists, about femininity and power. All our participants identified their femininity as intrinsically powerful as well as pleasurable, but in 1990s Britain there is very little cultural acknowledgement of feminine power. All the more reason for femmes to come together in order to create a community which reflects that power back to them, and outwards.



Offerings (Joe Breggia, 1997)

Embodying Desire: Piercing and the Fashioning of 'Neo-butch/femme' Identities

LISA WALKER

Being the kind of femme who goes for the high fashion look, I have not been 'into' piercing. An eyebrow ring would just clash with my Jackie O drag. My personal aesthetic has also informed my response to other women's piercings; as a rule, while they don't offend me, they don't really interest me either. That is, they didn't interest me until I kissed a woman with a piercing – a 12-gauge, ¾-inch-long stainless steel barbell through the centre of her tongue. It seems appropriate to give the statistics on the jewellery given its erotic function. Kissing Janet is a game of pursuit. The intangible thing that makes me want to kiss a woman more and longer and harder to find out what it is in her mouth that creates my desire becomes tangible, material, in the piercing. I seek out the metal in Janet's tongue, running my own tongue over it and taking it between my teeth. She likes that I seek it out, fetishizing it. She likes to withhold it, make me reach for it, and give it back to me.

The piercing magnifies one aspect of the erotic tension that I define as butch/femme, which is the psychological drama enacted around the butch's possession of the lesbian phallus. The lesbian phallus is, in fact, made possible by fetishism, the process of substitution through which other body parts or things stand in for the phallus as the 'original' signifier of sexual desire.¹ As Judith Butler explains, 'the displaceability of the phallus, its capacity to symbolize in relation to other body parts or other body-like things, opens the way for the lesbian phallus, an otherwise contradictory formulation' (Butler, 1993, p. 84). Janet's piercing, falling under the category of 'other body-like things', becomes the site of desire in that my wanting it assures her that she has it, and her having it makes me want it more. I read this as part of a butch/femme erotic exchange in that the lesbian phallus constitutes 'an ambivalent site of identification and desire' that is gendered, but in a way that is 'significantly different from the scene of heterosexuality to which it is related' because the phallus circulates as a signifier of desire between women, 'both recal[ling] and displac[ing] the masculinism by which it is impelled' (*ibid.*, pp. 85, 89).

Most discussions of piercing and lesbian identity do not relate piercing to a specifically butch/femme dynamic, but rather examine how piercing has become part of the visual economy of 'lesbian queer' culture. For example, piercing is among the symbols that distinguish lesbian queers from their precursors:

If lesbian feminists bought into essentialist beliefs about gender difference, today's lesbian queers have not. They see gender as a game, played with signs and symbols, whose meanings are constantly shifting and negotiable.

Their wardrobes read like a list of lesbian feminist horrors: leather and chains, high heels and stockings (worn over shaved legs!) and lacy push-up bras. Appropriating the symbols of gender, they announce: I can wear a dress and lipstick or have a pierced nipple. It has nothing to do with helplessness, the cult of beauty, or mutilation. (Whisman, 1993, p. 56)

This description of the lesbian queer is not specific to butch and femme identities, but it echoes the common refrain that the 'neo-butch/femme'² of the 1980s and 1990s is more flexible and fluid than its 1950s counterpart: today, women can supposedly switch roles and partners at will, so that femmes can go butch and butches can go femme, and butch/butch and femme/femme couples are more accepted.

Situated within the realm of the 'social postmodern', butch/femme has become one of queer theory's privileged examples of how lesbians reveal the constructedness of gender and sexual identities. While much recent criticism on butch/femme celebrates the new 'fluidity', some critics describe butch and femme using words like 'play', 'game', 'fantasy', 'theatrical' in ways that associate these identities with a politically naive superficiality.³ This suspicion of neo-butch/femme is accompanied by the persistent sense within many lesbian communities that butch/femme is a joke – it exists as an unfortunate aspect of lesbian history, or as atavistic if entertaining vocabulary for assessing how women dress, but it certainly no longer exists in the form of identities that women can embrace. Lesbians frequently refuse butch/femme by saying that they don't want to be labelled but 'seen as people'. This rhetoric of liberal individualism permeates middle-class lesbian communities that have traditionally dissociated themselves from butch/femme as a working-class phenomenon. But it is also increasingly evident in working-class communities that have historically been the site of 'serious' butch and femme 'role-play'. Paradoxically, the lack of seriousness ascribed to neo-butch/femme at once rescues it from the mire of gender essentialism and the putative rigidity of role-play in the 1950s, and defines it as an apolitical, generational reflex against the important issues raised by earlier feminists. Either way, butch and femme are defined as sexual or stylistic hobbies, identities that women experience as 'put on' rather than embodied.

In this discussion of 'non-mainstream body modification'⁴ and neo-butch/femme, I want to take up the question that Tracy Morgan asks when she wonders 'at whose expense the nouns "butch" and "femme" have been turned into adjectives to describe not beliefs or behaviors but certain styles of lesbian dress and demeanor' (Morgan, 1993, p. 35). In doing so, I challenge the notion that the apparent malleability of lesbian gender identity associated with anti-fashion looks such as piercing has displaced the way women experience butch and femme as embodied, expressive, and even fixed rather than fluid and ambiguous identities. I write from the point of view of a femme who plays her femininity very 'straight'. Perhaps in response to those who disapprove of my sartorial style, I sometimes argue that my love of all things high-femme is innate.⁵ My mother and aunts, involved in the women's movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, were bemused at having a little girl who cried because she wasn't allowed to wear her pretty dresses to play in the dirt.⁶ I'm sure that my tastes are also informed by class status. In Maine, where I've lived for the past two years, dressing down is a tradition among women who come from 'old money'. Both of my grandmothers, who sewed to keep themselves and their children in clothes that they could not have afforded to buy, taught me about the



Pride 1994 (Catherine Hennessy, 1994)

luxuries of beautiful buttons and fabrics with a good hand. They taught me that you can get away with an inexpensive dress if you have good shoes, but that cheap shoes will ruin the best outfits. In college, I tried the flannel-dyke look for a month. But in the end, even though my parents had become educated and upwardly mobile enough to send me to an expensive liberal arts school, I couldn't overcome my early home training. Today, I take a subscription to *Vogue*, my legs are always shaved, and I never wear torn stockings or white shoes before Memorial Day or after Labor Day.

I make no apologies for my appearance and no concessions to anyone else's expectations of what a 'real' lesbian should look like. I also take a lot of flak about how I dress, both from other dykes and from heterosexual feminists. Once, a straight friend tried to persuade me that my red lipstick and fingernail polish signified my capitulation to normative ideals of female beauty, while her orange toenail polish signified her rejection of those norms. Please. I had already referred her to my hair stylist because she was looking for somebody to help her keep up her mane of wavy bottle-blond hair. In the course of our conversation about wearing red nail polish and looking like a girl, she frustratedly asked me, 'But how do you tell the difference between a femme and a debutante?' It was an interesting question that I answered with another: 'Why do you need to tell the difference?' Such anxiety about being able to distinguish between straight women and lesbian femmes is certainly not subsiding in a culture where "style" becomes an increasingly crucial marker of social value and identity' (Hennessy, 1995, p. 56). In this context, and without denying the appeal of strategically torn stockings and a flash of steel, I wonder how many femmes have adopted the trendy anti-fashion look that Whisman describes as a way of making themselves visible as lesbians. For example, the femme in Catherine Hennessy's 1994 Pride photograph announces her identity through her punk-inspired chic as much as the butch does through her classic low-slung jeans

and white T-shirt.⁷ While both women wear the obligatory leather jacket, the butch's is accessorized with metal chains and handcuffs, augmenting her masculine style and pose (including the fortuitously placed cigarette), while heavy zipper and snaps on the femme's identical jacket play against her clingy velvet dress and exposed garters.

If the imperative to be visible as queer even partially motivates this look, the current emphasis on style-mixing may not simply reveal how gender identities are fabricated, but might also be read as another attempt to address the continuing 'problem' of the femme, who marks a lapse in the semiotic economy through which lesbianism is made visible. Many examples of how neo-butch/femme signifies its break from the more 'rigid' formulation of pre-1980s roles implicitly refer to femmes. It's surely not coincidental that these examples often revolve around shoes, arguably one of the more decisive markers between butch and femme styles. Wearing Doc Marten's with dresses, or wearing Doc Marten's one day and high heels the next, signifies the flexibility with which one can mix or move between styles. If we stop and think about it, however, the 'one' who needs to signify that flexibility is most likely the femme. Presented with the idea that butch/femme styles are now fluid, how often do we imagine that it is the butch who will don a dress or heels, rather than the femme who will stomp around in Doc Marten's performing contradiction?

I just don't want to be average

I first became interested in the connection between piercing and lesbian identities when a women's studies student taking one of my classes asked me to help facilitate a discussion of *Stigmata*, a 1991 videotape by Leslie Asako Gladsjø that looks at the increasing popularity among women of practices such as tattooing, cutting, piercing, and branding. In watching the video, I was struck by how it set up what I perceived as a false dichotomy between these practices and cosmetic surgery. *Stigmata* codes what social scientists have termed 'non-mainstream body modification' as iconoclastic, announcing women's reconfiguration of their relationship to the female body in opposition to normative standards of female beauty. The women in the video, both heterosexual and lesbian, articulate their understanding of non-mainstream body modification as a radical political practice by distinguishing themselves from women who elect to undergo cosmetic surgery. Kathy Acker, who speaks often in the video, says that women who get plastic surgery 'are just looking to come as close as possible to norms that they've internalized', while women who get pierced, tattooed, and cut are 'actively searching for who to be and it has to do with *their own pleasure*, *their own* feeling of identity – they're not *obeying* – they're not obeying the normal society . . . it's very different' (Acker, 1991, pp. 182–3).⁸ Andrea Juno, interviewing Acker, concurs when she suggests that cosmetic surgery 'could be a creative art form', but quickly goes on to argue that 'most people have actually *given up* their creativity, so this kind of remaking of the body is used for societal control' (*ibid.*, p. 182). In differentiating between tattooing and cosmetic surgery, Juno explains that:

Getting a tattoo is a participatory experience. It is not like being anesthetized and flopped on a table like a cadaver who has just given up her body and soul for a period of time to this medical 'institution' – usually a *male authority figure* – and getting plastic padding inserted underneath your nipple. (*ibid.*, p. 183)

The camera work and the editing of the video reinforce the distinction between cosmetic surgery and non-mainstream body modification. The documentary style footage of the women involved in non-mainstream body modification is intimate. Filming takes place in the women's homes and/or work spaces, and interviews are spliced with sequences showing women being pierced and marked in the company of friends. The footage of cosmetic surgery, on the other hand, emphasizes the clinical nature of the procedures, and represents women submitted to the scopic and corporeal regimes of male-dominated medical practices. The first male voice we hear in the video describes the process of liposuction, while on screen, doctors in gowns surround the draped body of a woman about to undergo surgery. The man comments on the low rate of complication: out of 100,000 surgeries, there have been only eleven deaths and nine cases of serious illness. Shortly after, we hear the voice of an unidentified woman explaining her decision to have breast surgery by saying 'I just want to be average'. Clearly, the point of body modification in this video is not to look average, and wanting to look average is a sign of false consciousness.

The danger of identifying the woman who wants to look average as a victim of false consciousness is that it reinforces the equation of traditional femininity with passivity. It also risks a form of élitism by casting women who 'lack' the advantage of a feminist, anti-capitalist education (and women who have had the advantage and still read *Vogue*) as unenlightened. Further, the dichotomy that *Stigmata* sets up between non-mainstream body modification as a radical political practice and cosmetic surgery as false consciousness is based on an opposition between non-mainstream and hegemonic cultures that assumes the existence of a monolithic 'mainstream' rather than examines how the notion of the mainstream might be a fiction about the uniformity of the dominant. In *Stigmata*, the mainstream is clearly associated with *the* patriarchy in a way that posits a uniform set of heterogendered expectations about female beauty and sexuality. The video does not account for what Hennessy describes as the 'variable' structures of patriarchy that reveal

the arbitrariness of the bourgeois patriarchy's gender system and helps to reconfigure it in a more postmodern mode, where the links between gender and sexuality are looser, where homosexuals are welcome, even constituting the vanguard, and where the appropriation of their parody of authentic sex and gender identities is quite compatible with the aestheticization of everyday life into postmodern lifestyles. (Hennessy, 1995, p. 63)

The concept of a postmodern patriarchy might be used to suggest that standards of female beauty are not static. For example, following Hennessy's logic, we might argue that the picture of the ideal woman could shift as lesbian and gay cultural codes are appropriated for the heterosexual marketplace.

Stigmata's assumption that there is a fixed standard of female beauty reveals how the very notion of the mainstream is based on a mimetic model of representation that presumes that one can read certain performances of the feminine as having a stable referent regardless of context. But such a view could not account for how the high-femme's approximation of normative standards of female beauty works in the context of a lesbian erotics except by positing butch/femme itself as a form of false consciousness – a belief that has been successfully criticized by writers such as Joan Nestle and Esther Newton, among others. With reference to body modification, the video defines cosmetic

surgery as what reifies mimetic models of representation because its scars and marks are supposed to heal and supposedly re-present the body in alignment with normative ideals of female beauty. Non-mainstream body modification, on the other hand, is insurgent because as 'a visually charged phenomenon that is by its very nature designed to be seen' (Myers, 1992, p. 272), it disrupts mimetic performances of femininity. But by setting up this opposition, *Stigmata* itself reifies mimetic models of representation and reveals how it is invested in creating and upholding the fiction of the mainstream in order to designate non-mainstream body modification as a radical political practice.

The video itself contains a critique of this binary in the segment featuring Diana Evans, who has corseted her body to achieve an exaggerated hourglass figure with a nineteen-and-a-half-inch waist. Evans's practice of corseting, involving a system of tighter and tighter binding, blurs the boundaries between 'non-mainstream' and 'mainstream' body modification. She creates a waspish waist and exaggerated curves that both recall and exceed contemporary Western ideals of female beauty.

But *Stigmata* does not articulate the potential critique of its own dichotomy implied by Evans's corseting. Students had the most difficulty classifying corseting in relation to other forms of body modification. Like many of the women with tattoos, piercings, and cuttings, Evans regards corseting as a transformation of the body that plays with aesthetics and pushes the extreme, and like many women with nipple and genital piercings, she claims that corseting makes sex more exciting. But unlike piercing and tattooing, students viewed corseting as a form of disfigurement, and thus acceded to standard medical models of non-mainstream body modification as a form of self-mutilation that indicates psychopathological problems (Myers, 1992, pp. 268–9).⁹ While it might be that the detrimental physical effects of corseting foster its association with deformity, it should be noted that certain forms of non-mainstream body modification are commonly known to have injurious physical consequences.¹⁰ Nipple piercings, for example, frequently become infected and can result in permanent insensitivity, and lip piercings can cause damage to the gums and teeth. These suggest that the association of corseting with mutilation has more complex origins. Evans describes corseting as a practice that makes her 'feel more feminine', and I would argue that her pleasure in embodying even an exaggerated and parodied form of 'traditional' femininity is the source of the students' discomfort. Their unease suggests that forms of Western body modification, both mainstream and non-mainstream, that do not set themselves up in explicit opposition to the defined normative ideals of female beauty are politically suspect within feminist and lesbian communities.

The cutting edge? 'From shock to chic'

The dichotomy between mainstream and non-mainstream body modification elides the fact that there is nothing intrinsically radical about any particular form of body modification. Granted, piercing and tattooing do not fall within typical Western standards of female attractiveness. But the function of non-mainstream body modification as a mark of both resistance to normative ideals of femininity and affiliation with lesbian communities that value such resistance rests on the implicit assumption that piercing and tattooing cannot be gendered in alignment with traditional standards of female beauty. It is worth noting that at least one survey of pierced women reveals that piercings

can, in fact, reflect an investment in specifically heterosexual norms of female beauty. One respondent, for example, answered the question about why she got her piercings as follows: 'I do not have a spectacular body, my husband quite rightly calls me a telephone pole with lumps. I think that my (nipple and clitoral hood) rings add to my being a woman' (Holtham, 1997). Her explanation obviously goes against the grain of *Stigmata's* view of piercing as a reclamation of the female body from the purview of male ideals of female beauty.

Further, in thinking about what forms of body modification constitute radical political practices, we might question the way that current trends in Western body modification rely on forms of primitivism. Raelyn Gallina, a San Francisco piercer, expresses the belief that piercing connects our post-industrial society back to a basic human need to mark the body when she says that 'in more tribal cultures women have access to ritual power of body modification; our culture is reclaiming that power' (*Stigmata*). Her comment suggests that while traditional Western forms of female body modification are politically suspect, many non-Western forms of body modification are seen as empowering – often because they are easily removed from historical contexts in which Westerners are not acculturated. Gallina, for example, who performs scarification, makes it clear that she does not do it 'the way that different African tribes do it for social or sexual reasons; i.e., a woman is available, or a woman has gotten married – rites of passage with a socio-sexual connotation' (Gallina, 1989, p. 104).

Primitivist discourses about how the ritual power of body modification reconnects contemporary Westerners to the need to mark rites of passage are also ahistorical in that they assume that the practices of body modification serve a universal function. Susan Holtham argues to the contrary, explaining that 'in traditional societies, ritual body modification practices connect people and their bodies to the reproduction of long-established social positions, whereas in the industrialized West body piercing seems to have the function of individuating the self from society' (Holtham, 1997). In contemporary Western culture, then, body modification is part of a narrative of self-development that reflects Western ideologies of individualism. For the women in *Stigmata*, body modification often marks rites of passages that are highly personalized rather than institutional; piercings, cuttings and tattoos can signify recovery from sexual trauma, commitment to a relationship that is not affirmed in heterosexual culture, or an awareness of self-identity.

The practice of borrowing forms of body modification from other cultures raises further issues of appropriation. As Danae Clark notes, 'because style is a cultural construction, it is easily appropriated, reconstructed and divested of its original political or subcultural signification. Style as resistance becomes commodifiable as chic when it leaves the political realm and enters the fashion world. This simultaneously diffuses the political edge of style' (Clark, 1991, p. 194). Indeed, the Web page for Notorious Ed's Underground Tattoo Shop indicates just how much the current renaissance of piercing and tattooing in the West has moved from its 'places of inception – away from the invitation-only SM piercing parties, the bikers' conventions, the private referral-only gay male piercing service – firmly into the domain of the popular' (Holtham, 1997). An article on the internet about Wendy, Ed's 'premier piercer', opens with the description of

A typical Friday night in Austin, [Texas] on Sixth street, the heart of this college town and state capital . . . these streets are filled with dyed, dreadlocked, tattooed, pierced, and otherwise tribal marked kids . . . Their

parents send them off to college in pressed chinos and cable knit sweaters and they come home for spring break with pierced tongues and a leather fetish . . . Not to worry, mom and dad. Ed's piercing space is set up according to Gauntlet standards and looks more like a hospital room than the medieval torture chamber most folks might picture. Executives, doctors, lawyers, and police officers are now among those with little stainless steel secrets under their clothing. ('Wendy and the Hate Tribe', 1997)

This reassuring pitch for Notorious Ed's begs the question of how piercing can work to announce any particular countercultural or subcultural identity, including lesbian identity, when it has already been appropriated by the bourgeois as a sign of cosmopolitan chic.

But piercing still seems to have enough 'residual connotations of deviance' (Holtham, 1997) to be read as one of the latest additions to the lesbian community's 'long tradition of resisting dominant cultural definitions of female beauty and fashion as a way of separating themselves from heterosexual culture politically and as a way of signalling their lesbianism to other women in their cultural subgroup' (Clark, 1991, p. 184). Edie, one of the women I interviewed in researching this topic, who identifies as femme in a 'joking' way, confirms this assertion. She describes getting some of her piercings and tattoos both as a sign of her general refusal of the 'corporate lifestyle' and as a way of gaining acceptance in a community where 'dykes aren't allowed to take fashion seriously' because it clashes with the feminist aesthetic that spurns vanity and dictates that it isn't politically correct for lesbians to care about appearance (1997, personal interview). Obviously, one might argue that the attention to piercing and tattoos as a mark of affiliation has everything to do with concern about appearance. And ironically, the use of piercing to announce a disaffiliation with corporate lifestyle in particular is a luxury afforded to middle-class lesbians with relative freedom to be queer. Lesbians with additional working-class jobs, unlike the artists, intellectuals and social workers who make up the cadre of pierced lesbians, cannot afford to look queer, and may not, in fact, define themselves against the corporate world in the same way that 'queer lesbians' do.

But in the context that Edie describes, piercing and tattooing are acceptable ways of drawing attention to appearance because they are associated with a 'hard', 'slutty', 'tough', and basically 'not so nice' version of femininity. In urban areas like San Francisco where queer chic is *de rigueur*, piercing also indicates that 'you're willing to be freaky', you've 'paid your dues', and so have a right to claim lesbian/queer identity. For femmes in particular, piercing and tattooing may have become privileged marks of difference because of their permanency. While both temporary and permanent forms of body modification can serve as what Myers terms 'a badge of admission – a visible record that affiliates [individuals] with others of similar interests and beliefs', temporary modifiers do not 'carry the emotional wallop of the irreversible body mark' (Myers, 1992, p. 292). Here Myers describes a collapse between identity and the body – a collapse through which piercing and tattooing can make a 'lesbian body'. Given popular beliefs about how femmes capitalize on their ability to pass for straight, the ability to create a lesbian body can be read as a powerful reverse discourse for femmes such as Edie; her permanent markings have the benefit of being less easily shed, making it more difficult for her to be mistaken as passing and thus solidifying her affiliation with queer culture.

Marking gender

In considering non-mainstream body modification as a way to mark identity, there is a distinction to be made between how piercing and tattooing announce a countercultural status to 'mainstream' society, and how they function within specific lesbian communities, where they also serve to mark gendered distinctions between women. According to Crow, a lesbian tattoo artist, butches and femmes get pierced and tattooed in ways that indicate their conscious desire to maintain distinct gendered identities. Crow suggests that 'fashion divas' for butch women may be 'home boys and fags', while other butches I surveyed named skater boys and ravers as fashion role models. Crow and Edie, partners whom I interviewed at the same time, talked at some length about how butches often describe their tattoos in terms of armour or machinery that encases the body, such as gauntlets, and choose tattoos that emphasize muscularity. Similarly, butches may select piercings coded as 'masculine', such as a ring or bar through the septum, a post underneath the center of the bottom lip, or a thicker post rather than a thin-gauge ring in gender-neutral places such as the eyebrow, and avoid piercings that draw attention to traditional female erogenous zones such as the breasts, stomach, and genitalia.¹¹ Finally, butches may choose large tattoos because they connote a certain machismo associated with the ability to withstand the pain of being 'under the gun' for long periods of time, as much as they choose them for aesthetic reasons.

Femmes have different fashion icons. While it was more difficult to find femmes to interview, informal scrutiny suggests that when getting tattoos and piercings, in addition to the usual small and 'cutesy' tattoos of roses and butterflies, traditionally feminine women often borrow from images of Greek goddesses, harem girls, and unspecified 'feminine' women. Unlike butches, femmes express concern that their tattoos not look masculine, and choose to emphasize their feminine features. For example, rather than having tattoos placed on forearms and biceps, they may have them placed on breasts, hips, ankles. If they do choose to have the upper arm tattooed, femmes may offset the placement with a distinctly feminine design, and they often describe their tattoos in terms of jewellery, such as bracelets and anklets. Likewise they often choose nipple, naval, and clitoral hood piercings to draw attention to the female body. And again, if they choose non-traditional piercings, such as lip piercings and eyebrow piercings rather than a dainty diamond stud in the curve of the nostril, they describe them as heightening their femininity. Edie, for example, has an eyebrow piercing because she thinks of her eyebrows as her most feminine feature. She would also consider a lip piercing because, with red lipstick, it would accentuate the femininity of her mouth by contrast.

In studying how butches and femmes mark themselves in different ways, I want to suggest that we may be reinscribing ourselves in gendered paradigms that are not immediately evident when we consider what non-mainstream body modification is intended to signify. In suggesting this, I do not want to dismiss the power of marking the body, but rather to question our assumptions about how that power works. The fact that piercing and tattooing signify gendered identities within the lesbian community shows that non-mainstream body modification can alter or accentuate how we experience being embodied female in ways that do not necessarily indicate the fluidity of gender identity, but instead express gendered identities that we experience as integral to who we are rather than as purely conscious choices we make about how to define ourselves. This powerfully reformulates the notions that butch/femme is a joke, that it is superficial, and

that 'neo-butches and femmes [are] merely playing with roles that had once been an integral part of identifying as lesbian', before performing gender became a postmodern game (Inness and Loyd, 1995, p. 4).

Finally, I want to suggest that non-mainstream body modification may not always be radical in terms of the visible. Let me return to Janet's tongue, as I enjoy doing, to describe how piercing can function to reaffirm butch and femme identities on another register. Specifically, I want to talk about the photo shoot in which we created the image that accompanies this essay. We had fun playing dress-up and posing for the camera. But because the point of the project was to get a good photo of Janet's piercing, the barbell was reduced to a visual icon. The photographer's directions to 'hold that' pose effectively halted the game of hide and seek that I describe at the beginning of the essay, and my desire to kiss Janet has more to do with touch than with sight. Aside from my desires, Janet chose to have her tongue pierced in the centre so that it would not be obviously visible when she speaks. So while in the photograph the barbell may play to the appeal of visual shock or scopophilic pleasure, that is not the intent behind her piercing. When the photographer's assistant who posed us for the camera reprimanded us for not listening to directions between shots because we were kissing 'for real', it became obvious that Janet's piercing is erotic for both of us at the level of the tactile, when our tongues interact. In her discussion of the 'corporeal ego', Kaja Silverman suggests that the tactile shapes our identity as much as the visual. 'The body', she argues, 'is profoundly shaped by the desires which are addressed to it, and by the values which are imprinted on it through touch' (Silverman, 1996, p. 13). This notion of the corporeal ego is useful in explaining how Janet's piercing becomes a part of a butch/femme erotic economy that works at the level of touch as well as image. If Janet's piercing makes the butch's phallic power tangible in the realm of the tactile, our kissing games reflect our relations to that power. While we may be equally invested in the notion of the lesbian phallus, we are differently invested; I want what she has, and she wants me to want it. In naming this difference, I am not by any means suggesting that our investments determine what we may or may not do in bed, or that butch/femme erotics always depend on the butch having the phallus – it is, after all, displaceable, detachable, if you will. So our investments in her piercing as the symbol of the lesbian phallus may not dictate how we fuck, but they may dictate how we feel about the way we fuck, about having and not having – about aspects of eroticism underneath or aside from the realm of the visible.

Losing Sue

HEATHER FINDLAY

November 10th, 1996

Went back to my mother's this morning after my first date with Sue. Well, not the first date, really, because we dated when we met each other before we were officially 'together', eight years ago last month. But the thing is, we're not together anymore, not after the note I left her on our dining room table last Friday: *please find another place to live at your earliest convenience . . . I hope you regret all this, because I will.* I regret the note, actually, but I was so angry, so tired of fighting . . . and now I'm not sure this *live-separately-and-dating* thing will work. Sex last night was like it has been for too long, drunken and sloppy, an obligation.

I've got myself into such a horrid position. The logic is compulsive: *If I'm so irresistibly sexy to her, she'll want to fuck me all the time – maybe make me feel loved again – but when she doesn't or when it's bad, I feel guilty, like, if only I could please her more, she would want me, love me, forgive me, come back to me.* So much for injecting romance back into our life. Listen to me, I don't sound like femme anymore. I sound like a fucking housewife.

Except to Sue, who looks at me like I'm a raving *vagina dentata* or something. She tells me she's threatened by my desire. How weird: I've so thoroughly turned myself into a sex object that I've forgotten what my own desire looks like, feels like. It has devolved into some vague demand for love – no wonder she feels threatened.

But the scariest thing is, maybe I *am* a housewife, at least in some fantasy we've been acting out increasingly over the past year. Sue told me last night – and obviously I'm not hearing the full impact of this – that she called 'the clinic' on Monday, the first business day after I packed my bags and fled. I knew she meant the gender clinic, that place downtown . . . I'm a little unsure of what it's all about, but I know that Shannon goes there to get her – his – hormones.

Didn't waste any time, did you? I remember thinking but not saying. It was like tossing a tarp of sarcasm over everything tender and vulnerable.



Sue (left) and Heather Findlay,
Halloween 1993

Sue says that when the clinic nurse answered, she cheerfully took Sue's chosen name – John – and made her an appointment for the following week.

November 17, 1996

Back at Mom's. Spent the night with Sue again last night, another failed attempt at a date. She's saying now, 'Let's just get together, no expectations about sex, see how it goes.' So of course we got into bed and fell asleep – like we were sisters or something.

But not really sisters. It's starting to dawn on me, the importance of this whole hormone thing. She's very excited about it, I can tell. In the kitchen last night, she told me about her first visit to the clinic. She described it as a loose-knit band of gender misfits, most of them male-to-female transsexuals, most of them prostitutes. The clinic is public; most of its clients are without health insurance, and many of them are impoverished. She told animated stories about tall, big-footed creatures with perky tits and five o'clock shadow, and short, peach-fuzzed, girl-boys – some of whom, she said, 'look like soft butches, I mean, no more "male" than Piper'.

Piper? *Oh, yes. Piper, from the bar, during the eighties in upstate New York. Cute. A jock. Square-framed, pretty good at pool. A young butch, although she would probably cold cock you if you called her that.* I mean, that was in another time and context, before – or beyond – Joan Nestle's tributes to her stone butch lovers, before the likes of Judith Halberstam went on the academic circuit promoting the much-maligned category of 'lesbian masculinity', before the so-called butch/femme renaissance, a quirky little subcultural life raft I'd been clinging to for eight years. It was a space, in short, beyond butch pride'.

I looked at Sue last night in our kitchen, and I saw that she wasn't on that raft anymore. There's this new mixture of excitement and worry on her face. She's thinking, *if soft butches like them can do it, can be a man, so can I. But what if I'm never more than a butch dyke?*

More than a butch dyke. Like it's a bad thing now, like it isn't – wasn't ever? – enough.

November 18, 1996

Pulled Jill Johnston's classic, *Lesbian Nation*, off my old bookshelf in my mother's house; have been finding solace in it. Johnston insists she's against butch/femme, but I don't care, I imagine from her funny tales about trying to seduce a rich, straight, 'daddy's girl' – something that would never occur to me to do – that Johnston is a butch. Besides, her fiery commitment to lesbian feminism is an antidote to the chill I feel when I imagine living with Sue as John – going back, that is, to being straight. I remember when, in my twenties, I read *Lesbian Nation's* call to arms ('All women are lesbians!') for the first time. Johnston gave me my first glimpse of lesbianism not just as a way some gals got their rocks off, but as a revolution.

Last time I saw Sue, she urged me to believe that sex with her as John won't be all that different. In a way she's right; it was a long time ago, when I last touched Sue's breasts, her sex, or got into bed with her when she wasn't packing. Without lower surgery, it's true I guess, Sue would be much the same in bed.

But then I remember Johnston's story, which is a story about how sexual desire has to do with a lot more than genital contact. And I look down at Johnston's book, the story of how she came to understand that all women – regardless of whether or not they were banging other women – are lesbians; how she realized, in other words, that lesbianism is also about a political movement, a history of resistance against male power, and then all this crazy stuff about our early psychological bond with our mothers.

Yeah, sounds crazy, but here I am now, in retreat, sequestered in my mother's house, that symbolically central place in second-wave feminist literature.

November 23, 1996

No more dates. I'm kicking myself for being so naive, stupid enough to think we could 'date', and everything would go back to the way it was. The most intimate we got last night was a bath. Sue always hated baths, but for a while now the tub has been the only place where we can be undistracted (and, it's true, sober) enough to talk. The couples counselling idea came up again, but wasn't any more appealing to Sue. She wants me to go to a 'friends and lovers of transsexuals' support group she found out about at the clinic.

It felt like breaking up again. I reacted with hostility: *You just want me to go so that you can get what you want and keep me too.* But I'm no less selfish. I want her to go to couples counselling so I can convince her to give up on this whole transsexual thing.

Mostly I'm terrified. *I don't want to be with a man, I'll lose track of myself in that room, I won't know if I'm resisting being 'a lover of a transsexual' because I'm not, or just because I'm afraid.*

Even though for eight years I've lived with, loved, and longed for a woman who frequently passes on the street – sometimes even in my mind, I admit – for a guy, I don't want to go. How strange that that one phone call to the clinic brought into sharp and painful relief some fine line, never fully articulated by me to myself, between the butches I love and the men I fear. How could it be that one day she was the former, and now the latter?

Thanksgiving Day, 1996

Invited Sue to dinner at mom's tonight. We went around the table and named what we were thankful for. When she said she was thankful for being invited, she got all choked up.

Sue told me the story of a male-to-female transsexual they discovered on the steps of the clinic, nearly dead from a heroin overdose, no life signs. She was 'from somewhere in the midwest'. The clinic organizers took her in, put her on oestrogen, and now, says Sue, she's OK. I think about that image for a while, the image of a homeless, strung-out, effeminate thing lying on the steps, her last bit of *chi* expended to get to that building, that magical place where some injections and some surgery – if she ever managed to turn enough tricks to pay for it – would make her into a woman and save her life.

December 1, 1996

Moved back into our house today. Sue and I went through the sad process of moving her out of our bedroom. I'm relieved but mournful; she's just willing to try anything.

I've buried myself in a pile of books Sue's been reading. Went straight to Bernice Hausman's *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender*, I admit selfishly, because I know our female-to-male transsexual friend, Shannon, hates the book. A lot of FTMs hate the book, Sue tells me, because Hausman is, in her words, 'critical of the phenomenon of transsexualism, [while] I hope it is clear that I do not (cannot) condemn transsexuals themselves'. I'm hoping – I know, I'm naive, still raw – Hausman will help me figure out why I'm against this whole thing.

It's a good book, actually. I can see why Shannon hates it, because it's not about how transsexuals themselves have defined their identity. It's about medical definitions of and interventions in transsexualism. Hausman is a Foucauldian, so no wonder it's not a feel-good book. It's a pretty disturbing account, actually, of how medical institutions have 'produced' transsexuals under the banner of pathology.

Found myself misreading it, as if it were simply an attack on these surgeons and endocrinologists. I know I'm just lashing out, but right now I'd like to fire bomb that damn clinic for taking Sue away.

I see my own story in the book. It's like the circumstances of my break up with Sue have hit me with the blunt force of history: this weird, millennial moment in which we live, a time where medical technologies have made it possible to be 'a transsexual'. I think about the speed with which all this is happening, and I feel sorry for myself to have been born in that certain historical moment where (in my own, hurt, and therefore reductive reasoning) it's so terribly simple to change one's sex.

I half-joke with my friends that I'm experiencing what is becoming an occupational hazard for femmes at the close of the twentieth century: don't blink, because when you open your eyes your butch will have kissed her elbow and turned into a man.

But it's not so simple; one cannot, of course, really kiss one's elbow and become a man. In a way, it's good that Sue didn't have to live for a year as a man first. (I used to wish that the clinic made her do that, but now I realize that was just because I wanted her to change her mind, which she won't.) As it is, Sue's cross-over is fraught with difficulty and anxiety, anxieties centred mostly upon her female body. ('I'm too short, my beard will be light-coloured, I'm stuck with my breasts until I can save \$5,000.') Sue reminds me, too, of Hausman's conclusion, about how 'the body . . . resists making "gender" real'. This stubborn materiality works to the frustration of transsexuals who are struggling against a world where female-born people are forced, often under pain of death, to be women. (Note to myself: read next Leslie Feinberg's *Transgender Warriors*, which understands Joan of Arc's execution as an example of this enforcement.) But it also works to the frustration of a medical institution which is struggling to uphold that very world, either via brutal 'corrective' surgery on hermaphroditic infants, lack of progress in technology for adult female-to-male transsexuals, or any of the other multitude of ways that medicine has co-operated with a 'two-gender system'.

December 5, 1996

Sue asked me if I would start to call her John today.

December 6, 1996

Hungover today. I guess it's really over. I wish I wouldn't get so hostile: I couldn't talk to (it's hard to write this) *John* about his name change. It's like I'm participating in alienating Sue from me, but I guess no more so than insisting on separate bedrooms. That was my idea.

We talked instead about what his plans were beyond (oh, God) *his* name change. He's on a waiting list for hormones, and, oh, God, he wants to get his breasts removed. Through a haze of gin, I asked him if he wanted to get lower surgery. (At least I know enough to call it that.) 'Maybe,' he said. 'If I ever have \$50,000.' I felt queasy. I got upset. I told him we've got this book in the office by Loren Cameron, a transsexual photographer, called *Body Alchemy*. I told him the book made me cry, especially that 'Before and After' section. In all the 'before' photos, the FTMs look like sad butches. In all the 'after' photos, they look like happy men. My editorial assistant quoted Zora Neale Hurston and said, 'it was like something inside me fell off a shelf'. That's exactly it. Cameron's subjects were nice-looking guys, true. Not scary. But still, it felt like a subconscious and inevitable refrain about falling. Sad butch turns into happy man.

Now that refrain must be like a happy ending for Loren and his fellows. To me, it was like looking at a long line of fallen warriors.

Then there were those pictures of the penises they make out of the FTMs' breasts. I can't help it, but I wish Loren hadn't put those pictures in his book. They were scary. John told me they scared him, too, but that didn't assuage my repulsion. 'What,' I said to him, 'you hate your female genitals so much you would rather have those, one of those *Frankenstein* penises?'

The hurt on his face was so tangible I backed down and felt bad about what I'd said.

Read the passage again in Hausman's book about the 'uncooperative body'. It's not that Hausman *likes* or idealizes all those female bodies that refuse to become male. It suddenly occurred to me that the book's post-surgery pictures were like the Real – the little I remember of it from grad school – it's not good or bad, in fact it's mostly just a pain in the ass, an insistent, bodily 'thing' that resists symbolization, resists being integrated into the Symbolic, in this case, the ordering of male versus female.

December 15, 1996

Call it intellectualizing my pain, but I'm into thinking about the transsexual body as an example of the Real – perhaps the most prominent modern one, at least in my urban/professional lesbian context, where I see so many books, essays, and unsolicited submissions about FTMs these days. That's another thing. In the midst of all this we're planning this 'Men We Love' issue. It started as a goof on *Esquire's* 'Women We Love' issue, but it's got so complicated.

Like Lacan's implicit attack on the king of post-structuralism, Derrida, Hausman's book is a critique of certain post-structuralist apologies for transsexualism, like Kate

Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. (Finally bought it for John for Christmas, but read first of course.) Bornstein's book is all about how transsexualism 'deconstructs' the two-gender system by promoting a proliferation of genders, a free play of gender expression.

But I see what Hausman's problem is with this argument. It's twofold. First, many self-identified transsexuals (like John, for example) are quite *fond* of the two-gender status quo. In their eyes, their only problem is that they were born on the wrong side of a fence they have no intention of breaking down, only of jumping over. The position of such transsexuals cannot simply be dismissed as politically reactionary. Their position marks the second problem with – indeed, the very limit of – the Bornstein/post-structuralist take on transsexualism, which is that, says Hausman, 'there is a logical inconsistency between doing away with gender and making more genders'.

Hausman is saying that the true disruption of gender lies not in some free-play of signification, a proliferation of genders, some utopian world populated by (in Halberstam's words) 'guys with pussies, dykes with dicks, queer butches, aggressive femmes, F2Ms, lesbians who like men, daddy boys, gender queens, drag kings, pomo afro homos, bulldaggers, women who fuck boys, women who fuck like boys, dyke mommies, transsexual lesbians, male lesbians'. For Judith, all this gender freedom on the frontiers brings forth the 'more general fragmentation of the concept of sexual identity' – that's why she thinks – or at least thought, because I've heard that she's publishing again on the topic – we're all transsexuals.

But Hausman is saying, rather, that it is our task as critics and activists to focus, paradoxically, on the resistant, non-signifying materiality of the body. The subversion of gender lies not in the multiplication of gender meanings, but in the limits of gender meaning itself, the mute irreverence of the body. The history of transsexualism in particular is marked by the body's blunt refusal to co-operate in the construction of the social meanings of gender, either by doctors or self-identified transsexuals: 'the body does not accommodate all the procedures of "sex change": the body, in other words, resists making "gender" real'.

When I feel hurt and rejected, the femme in me wants to be some kind of cheerleader for the Real, as if it were John's female body – his old butch body – saying, 'I don't want to be a man. I'm going to be difficult and stick around as a woman'. But of course it's not that simple. The Real doesn't talk, that's the whole point.

December 20, 1996

Dreamed last night that I lived in a big Victorian house, similar to our house now, but larger. Somebody was working on the house: all the furniture had been taken out or covered with tarps. I had a good feeling about the work, like it was something I had been waiting to work on for a long time and I trusted the people who were doing it. In my bedroom there remained only a bed on the floor. It was morning, and Sue came in, got into bed with me, and I knew she wanted to make love to me, and although I didn't think it was a good idea, I too was longing, and longing for her. But suddenly she transformed into a monstrous creature: a tight, black, rolled-up being, like a slimy gargoyle, only warm and wrought with pain. Between her feral legs jutted a huge phallus. Her whole dark form was shiny, as if she were covered in lubricant. She shot a hurt look at me, and I realized

I had done something wrong, though I can't remember what it was. She said now she was unable to have sex with me. Even more pressing than the horror of her transformation is the guilt I feel, as if I had triggered it.

Christmas Day, 1996

Had to talk on the phone today to my family and friends. Christmas check-in. My friends and I skirt the hugeness of John's sex change by criticizing her – his – choice of names: 'John?' they ask. 'Why John? Couldn't she – he – have come up with something more original?' I explain that I think he's named herself after a client of hers, an older, developmentally disabled man. I remember how John was fond of calling me 'mama Heather', and how Sue, when she was still Sue, encouraged it because she liked to think of me as her old lady, surrounded by offspring. There's that old housewife fantasy again. I also remember that the client John was a homosexual, and how excited he would get when he told us about his latest sexual encounter, usually with another man who was also developmentally disabled, who declared himself straight, and who told John when he fucked him that John was a woman. I think it confused John a bit, but mostly it pleased him because he associated being a 'woman' with love and sexual pleasure.

I tell our friends I believe that 'Sue' identified with John, and that's why he's taken his name. I think to myself, moreover, that he identified with him not as a homosexual, but on the basis of his gender transformation, no matter how fleeting or homophobic its context (his lover called John a woman because he was refusing to recognize his own desire for another man). Finally, John, my John – no, not my John – doesn't want to choose a name that might carry with it any ambiguity. 'It's nice and generic', he says.

John's father's nickname was Butch, a little fact about his past that I always adored, but he doesn't want to take that name because, I'm sure, he's aware of how, these days, it connotes 'butch dyke'. He doesn't, either, think that he'll turn out to be a very butch man. Mom is on target; she thinks he chose 'John' because, as in the vocabulary of hookers, John is Everyman's name. But most of all, John wants there to be no back door, no hint that somewhere behind his maleness lurked a woman, even if she was a butch dyke. He's happy to have 'John', much more definitively male than the names of some of the transgendered men we know, Loren, Shannon, Jay.

December 31, 1996

John started injecting himself with testosterone today. I've never seen him so keyed up. I feel devastated.

January 1, 1997

You have a whole new life dawning, something new and wonderful to look forward to, and me, my whole life is falling apart, with nothing on the horizon.

January 1, 1997 (later)

I'm about to leave for a week's vacation with a sometime lover of mine, a butch dyke named Robin. I'm trying to look forward to getting away. But I'm so basically sad, I'm wondering if I can forget.

Why is it that I'm temporarily happy with Robin, who's so stone she makes me join her in the jacuzzi with the lights off, her body hidden beneath the white foam of bubble bath, but not with John? What's the difference? That's John's question.

January 10, 1997

Robin's gone. Tried to console myself by cracking *The Persistent Desire* for the first time in many years.

On the first page is an inscription, 'May '92, for Heather, Amanda'.

Cried when I read it. Thought about that brief affair years ago. She seduced me at a conference by letting me know she could come while fucking her femme with her dildo. I was inexperienced and very impressed. She contributed to the anthology, but by 1994 Amanda changed her name to Jay and moved to England to become a man.

I hear he's happy now. I read his essay on the emerging field of transgender studies. It was really good. Better than his essay for *The Persistent Desire*.

But, selfishly, I feel so alone.

When I confess to my friends that I now have two lovers who have turned into men, I can sense some of them wondering in silence about my psychology. (As if I haven't already, obsessively.) But Diane – managing editor that she is, managing in so many ways – hugged me and lent me her condolences. She knows how devastated I am about John, regardless of the sex change stuff. And she's worried, too, that it's not just me. Maybe all the butches are turning into men.

January 27, 1997

My birthday today. John and Mom took us out to the yacht club and we had a good time. Lots of presents, just like old times. Only John's John now.

I told Mom I was thinking about letting John stay in the house. She's against it. She thinks he's hanging around waiting, trying to convince me to go back to him.

I love my mother. Reminder to myself: stop taking her for granted. She's way beyond acceptance of me, of my being gay. She's *protective* of me.

January 29, 1997

John and I decide that he should stay in the house. It's too hard for him to find a cheap enough apartment by himself, and having a dog makes his search even harder. I worry aloud with my friends about how weird the arrangement is, and they reassure me by telling me stories about how they lived with exes. 'It's a lesbian thing', they say.

It occurred to me today: John's and my current living situation is more 'lesbian' than the one we had before we broke up.

February 15, 1997

John and I offered a spare bedroom to a visiting photographer. I knew her as Della, an accomplished lesbian photographer, but by the time Della arrived I realized that she is now 'Del', is on testosterone, and is undergoing his own gender transformation. *Oh, no, not another one.* I told Del that I'm sorry, I had no idea; the mutual friend who set us up had not told me. Del laughed. 'It's okay,' he says. 'I prefer being called "he", but I don't really identify as a man. I identify more as a hermaphrodyke.'

Was running this new word through my mind while Del proudly introduced me to his assortment of passports and driver's licences, some of them reading 'M', some of them 'F'. I listen to the story of the benefit for Leslie Feinberg he and John attended. John came home excited but reeling from the dizzying assortment of genders at the event. Apparently, report both John and Del, the trend among San Francisco transsexuals is to date other transsexuals, a phenomenon Del finds arousing, but John finds a little dismaying.

Hermaphrodites, men who were once women dating other men who used to be women. I think of Judith's long list of gender outlaws. The benefit must have been an embodiment of that.

Hideous as I've always regarded gender conformity, I feel woozy imagining this cornucopia of 'gender performances', like the meaning of gender, rather than having been disrupted, has simply spun out of control and is whirling into white noise.

February 20, 1997

I don't stay up late today. Finished a book review of *Susie Bright's Sexual State of the Union*, which I agreed to write for *The Lesbian Review of Books*.

'Love being a gender', writes Susie Bright. She doesn't mean that she wallows in the narcissism of being a woman, debased and disempowered by the world. She meant that she finds some pleasure in her femininity, a pleasure she's had to wrest from the jaws of a woman-hating planet, a pleasure that feminism has helped her refashion out of the ash heaps of passivity, penis envy, and the rest of it. The pleasure, perhaps, that she finds not really in 'performing' femininity, but being embodied as female, even if (as I know from having seen Susie on many occasions) she has a body that is too tall, too square, too intellectual-looking for the sex-kitten pose she strikes, for example, for Simon and Schuster's cover of her new book.

I wonder, because Susie's bi, what it's like for her to 'perform' femininity with a butch versus with a man. Oh, I don't know. Maybe it's not about performing at all. I stared a long time at her picture on the front of the book. She has a kid now. Has she become a housewife, like I did?

Obviously not. She's the author of all those books, all those books that I read obsessively, all those books that rocked my world. Does writing make you a 'femme' as opposed to a 'housewife'?

February 28, 1997

Came out for John today to his mother. Accidentally. I changed the answering machine to 'Heather and John', and she called while we weren't there. John knew I had changed the message, and didn't do anything about it, so it's not all my fault, but I was horrified.

John called her back. She asked him why he did it, and he said, 'because I could'. She answered (sarcastically, says John), 'Oh, how nice for you.'

March 1, 1997

I was scared, but I picked up Janice Raymond's *Transsexual Empire* today. If feminism is – in the words of this much-maligned foe of transsexualism – 'a collective political challenge to power', what happens to that collectivity when it dissipates into 'an expressive individualism' whereby we can choose whatever gender we please (male or female or hermaphrodite, etc.) just because medical science has made it possible?

I see why FTMs hate Raymond. It's her take on transsexualism, which she sees as some insidious, conscious assault on the women's community. But in what ways is *Transsexual Empire* about politics in a way that the emergent, thoroughly medicalized, fully individualistic, transsexual movement is not? Has the admittedly basic and increasingly unsexy concept of women-as-a-class really become *that* useless? I see the giddy 'elective' gender identities of the FTMs, for example, that went to that Leslie Feinberg benefit, and I feel sad, as though gender, which used to be a weighty political and erotic category for me, has become something you put on for a party. Mind you, a lot of my lesbianism has been about 'doing what I want'. But most of it, goddamn it, has been a whole lot of hard work.

March 1, 1997

It's hard work for John, too, I guess. He's pretty upset about his mom calling.

March 2, 1997

I've been reflecting a lot lately on how, through the experience of splitting up with John, I've been having to come out as a lesbian all over again. Nothing about being an activist, publishing a lesbian magazine, or writing about dyke issues has prepared me to articulate again, now that I'm an adult, why, now that my lover of eight years wants to be a man, I don't want to be with him anymore.

How weird.

To some, like my friend Kirk, it seems obvious: 'In her whole life,' he says in his well-meaning, queeny voice, 'personal and professional, Heather celebrates women.' But how can Kirk account for the fact that I've always been drawn not just to women, but to masculine women? What's up with that?

The same question, of course, occurred to John. I remember how, in the final moments of being Sue, he pleaded with me to understand that he would still be the same person. No, he said, he would be a happier, better person, because he was about to

make a slight adjustment so that his outward appearance and identity would be in sync with the way he felt about 'herself' inside. And indeed, over the past few months, already he has blossomed – maybe too feminine a word – into a better-looking human being. He's lost what I call 'that butch slouch', he grooms his hair, he has a new wardrobe, he looks like a carefully put together, though very small, self-confident man.

So much could be written about that euphemism 'transition' that transsexuals use to describe their change – it's a word that, for most people, connotes a smooth, comfortable movement, like the slippage from drowsiness to sleep. It's a friendlier word than 'sex change', which carries the burden of that ugly word 'sex' and the jarring word 'change'. But what seems to him to be a small transition still strikes me as a sea change, a gargantuan shift in meaning.

March 10, 1997

Am getting very tired of having to come out to people (straight and gay!) again and again.

Today I got all pissed off, thinking, *It's like lesbianism 101. Everybody wants to know why you don't want to be with men. Men, men, men.* It doesn't occur to anyone to ask you why it is you love women.

March 11, 1997

Am feeling a little less grouchy today. Partly because I realized I haven't been asking myself why it is I love women.

Read my *Persistent Desire* again. Slipped past Amanda's inscription. Went to Kennedy and Davis's 'They Was No One to Mess With' about butches in the 1940s and 1950s bar culture in Buffalo.

These butches, particularly the leaders, were extremely masculine, and often thought of social dynamics in terms of male and female relationships. Yet at the same time they were not men, they were 'queer'. They did not refer to one another by masculine pronouns, and they adopted unisex rather than exclusively masculine names . . .

Not like John, with his 'he' and his 'John'.

. . . Throughout their life stories, they emphasize acquiring masculine characteristics while not being male . . . In their interactions with men in the bars, butches wanted to be respected as men but not treated as if they were men.

Oh, and then my favorite part:

The relationship between masculinity and butch sexuality is similarly complicated. Inherent to the butch-fem dyad was the presumption that the butch was the physically active partner and the leader in lovemaking. As D.J. explains, 'I treat a woman as a woman, down to the basic fact [that] it'd have to be my side doin' most of the doin'. . . in contrast to the dynamics of most heterosexual relationships, the butch's foremost objective was to give sexual pleasure to a fem . . .

March 12, 1997

Finding more solace in my books.

When I first read something positive about 'femme', I remember I was ecstatic. It was the first, non-clichéd, positive name I'd ever heard for my femininity. I remember reading Joan Nestle's *A Restricted Country*, and coming to that paradigm-shifting passage – for me at least – where Nestle remembers an old world femme who used to frequent the bars in mid-century Greenwich Village. The woman carried a little silk purse, and through the thin, pink material Nestle remembers seeing the outline of a dildo. As I read that passage and imagined that woman in my mind, I felt the full impact of having a history, a history that was filled not with passivity and powerlessness, but active desire and resistance. *She was showing the world what she wanted . . . A butch/femme couple walking down the street announced to the world that they were lesbians, that they were sexual with each other . . .* Passages like those ran through my mind like a mantra. I remember, too, how 'femme' was the first positive description of my femininity that wasn't a tired old way of insisting that no, no, it's *great* to be a woman ('men open doors for you', 'you have great intuition', blah, blah, blah). It was new, and it wasn't an attempt to glamorize some unspoken lack, to give a fancy name (or dress, or shoes, or some other fetish) to a social and political nothing.

April 1, 1997

Overheard John talk to his sister today. I was in the kitchen cooking and he was standing right there talking.

He called her and introduced himself by saying 'This is your brother John calling.' He sounded triumphant. Despite myself I was proud of him.

I overheard him saying that he always, always was a boy in his mind, that he *could* kind of pull that off when he was young and gay, but he *really* couldn't bear to grow into an old woman.

He was always a man in his mind.

Too tipsy to write anymore. Both of us drank too much tonight while he was talking on the phone.

April 2, 1997

Didn't sleep well. Woke up to write.

Had a major realization through the fog of this morning.

It's not that I'm coming out again, like I'm repeating myself after a thirteen-year hiatus of being just fine. Truth is, I'm still coming out. When I think about the fact that it's happened to me twice now, that two of my lovers have turned into men, and when I think about John telling his sister last night that he was always a man in his mind, I feel bowled over by the realization that I've been living publicly as a lesbian for thirteen years, I'm a 'professional lesbian' even, and yet on some deeper (unconscious?) level, I was fucking *straight*. Like I still had one foot – maybe more than that – on the other side, like I couldn't leave or something. And I didn't even know it. I feel so stupid.

It's a sign of my mental health, I guess, that I feel like laughing, not crying.

Looking now at losing Sue in a whole different way: it's not that I was in a lesbian relationship, and then my lover turned into a man, so we broke up because I'm not

straight. No, it's something totally different, almost the exact opposite. I was in a fucking *straight* relationship, and it took John becoming John to make that explicit.

April 3, 1997

Talked to Robin today. First time since I broke things off a few weeks ago, too deep in mourning to deal. She's good. She's in a new relationship with a woman who likes her butches stone, but not too stone, wink wink. Robin has decided she wants to get back in touch with being a woman, not just because of her new sweetie, but because all this surgery she had – cysts and potential ovarian cancer – has given her a new relationship to her body. I'm glad for her. She says she feels like a lesbian again, and two of her good friends are giving her a coming-out party.

I think I need one of those, too. Am feeling today, actually, like a Hallmark card, like today is the first day of the rest of my lesbian life. I still feel loss over the fact that it won't be with Sue. But he's John now, not Sue, and I don't want to go there with him. I have other things – other women – in mind.

I'm overwhelmed with the prospect of coming out again. Think about it all the time. Actually, I'm overwhelmed by the prospect of coming out again and again over the rest of my life. Not like this time, where it caught me by surprise. Not even like the first time, when I had to bust my butt to get some butch to sleep with me and 'make' me a lesbian. From now on, I'm going to be like that woman in Joan Nestle's book, that femme with the little, bulging, pink purse. It's still the same kind of world: hostile, lonely, without many signifiers for lesbian desire, not many ways for a woman such as me to announce what it is she wants. I think this whole continual-coming-out thing is particularly necessary for feminine lesbians, because it's so easy for us to co-operate with, even bow down to, the various codes of our invisibility. I forget sometimes, but it's still a world where if you don't say it, someone will say it for you, and they won't get it right.



Della No 1 (Joan Woods, 1996)

A Tale of Two Annies

EMMA DONOGHUE

On 27 December 1891, the *New York Sun* carried an anonymous feature under this headline:

STRANGER THAN FICTION **THE TRUE STORY OF ANNIE HINDLE'S TWO MARRIAGES**

The article was occasioned by the funeral of a woman called Annie Ryan in Jersey Heights, but it focused on her famous 'husband', Annie Hindle. Hindle was one of the first and most successful male impersonators of the early music hall. Her brief marriage to the actor Charles Vivian ended because of his violence to her. Hindle's private life became public drama in June 1886 in Grand Rapids, Michigan, when she used her stage costume and the name of 'Charles Hindle' (borrowing a forename from the man who was still her legal husband) to marry her stage dresser Annie Ryan in a religious and legal wedding ceremony. The story of the two Annies was told again in Franklin Graham's theatre history, *Histrionic Montreal* (1902). More than a century later, I came across the story in a footnote to an article on male impersonation by Laurence Senelick (see *Essays in Theatre*, 1(1), 1982), and wrote a play with songs called *Ladies & Gentlemen* (1996). What follows is a brief exploration of butch/femme issues – these anachronistic terms being the simplest shorthand – around the long-forgotten scandal of this (literally) role-playing couple.

The *New York Sun* reporter casts a surprisingly sympathetic eye on this 'strangest spectacle'. He obviously bonded with the widowed Hindle at the funeral, describing her as a plump blonde with a deep, sweet voice and a 'firmly cut' mouth, despite quivering lips, that shows her 'great mental force'. He acknowledges her as having been a great mimic, singer, and 'dashing handsome' male impersonator who was besieged by female fans. Similarly, Franklin Graham (who seems to have interviewed Hindle a few years later for *Histrionic Montreal*) describes her in fairly positive, androgynous terms, as pretty, sturdy and lightly moustached; he adds the comment that she 'believes at times that she is a man'. Clearly these writers do not know what to make of Hindle, but they approve of her success as a man (which includes wealth, fame, glory, and settling down by the sea with a Victorian wife).

This was an irresistible story for a play: two women, so very different in their gendered self-presentations to the world, both daring enough to organize a wedding and get away with it. Theatre thrives on contrast between characters, and butch/femme is one of the many polarities that create frissons of comedy and eroticism.

It is pure coincidence that the two women in this story shared the same name, but it also raises the issue of sameness. (Paranoid though it may be, lesbian writers are often

haunted by the idea that heterosexuals will not be able to tell our characters apart.) The nickname 'Ryanny' for Annie Ryan, invented for the play, has the effect of containing the shared name as an echo. As Hindle tells Ryan jokily, 'We can't have two Annies in one dressing room'; the two Annies need to be strikingly different for the play to work.

Something that took a lot of deliberation was how to offer a sense of Hindle's sexual identity, without transplanting 1990s concepts into the 1880s. In *Ladies & Gentlemen* Hindle is presented not as transgendered or even a transvestite, but as a conscious, playful sort of butch. Her identity grows in the hothouse world of theatrical vaudeville, in the plays within the play. Her butchness is acted out as much through joking and quarrelling man-to-man, as through flirting with women and her friend Gilbert the female impersonator; it is not a purely sexual matter. Verbal and physical swagger contribute to it as much as costume. To underline this, the play shows Hindle at various stages in the dressing process, from full man's costume for her song-and-dance act, to loose braces, trousers and women's underwear in the dressing room, to orthodox women's dress for street wear. Hindle's androgyny is presented not as a fixed look but as a willingness to play both genders and something in between. The songs that punctuate the play – based on fragments of Victorian music-hall pieces – function to make fun of the 'missing' phallus and to emphasize the sexual generosity that divides the butches from the men.

That feller who sits there beside you, my dear
 What's he got? I declare, it's a swizz
 There's no pleasure that I would deny you, my dear
 My pocket's as heavy as his

One problem of historical fiction-writing is that in hindsight we tend to see the butches of previous centuries (or even decades) as the real, visible, daring lesbians; in historical novels and plays the 'hero', as it were, is often the mannish woman. Femmes often get erased from lesbian history, or are seen as passive, merely adapting to butch desire. (One notable exception is Ellen Galford's *Moll Cutpurse*, which strikes a nice balance between the womanly herbalist narrator and the manly thief.) In *Ladies & Gentlemen* the obvious challenge was to make Annie Ryan just as vivid as Annie Hindle, even though we know so much less about her real life.

The *Sun* reporter characterizes Hindle's 'dresser and faithful companion' as a Victorian stereotype: 'A pretty little brunette of 25 – a quiet, demure girl, who made friends wherever she went'. Franklin Graham in *Histrionic Montreal* has nothing to add about her. It was necessary to invent a lot of history for Ryanny; for example, to give her a secret past, the play reveals her to have been one of the many Irish girls who became nuns to get sent out to America, then left the convent. The *Sun* reporter characterized Annie Ryan as practical, nurturing, and conventionally feminine. What the play tries to do is to suggest that this is, in some sense, her 'act' – not a lie, but not the full story either – and that behind her naivety and demureness is a will of iron.

Other contrasts counterpoint the butch/femme polarity, so that the whole play does not rest on this one difference and make it bear too much. Ryanny is distinguished from her highly camp peers in the dressing-room by her firm sense of God, family and home.

RYANNY: I'm going to be married by the time I'm thirty. *(they all stare)*

GILBERT: That's nice, dear.

ANNIE: *(going down on her knees)* You mean in all the time you've been in America, not a single gentleman has had the courtesy to propose?

RYANNY: *(amused)* Ah, stop it. You're only mocking.

When it comes to the wedding, Franklin Graham in *Histrionic Montreal* simply reports that, being 'much attached to each other', the two women got married. The *Sun* reporter is more amused by this 'strangest romance', but still quite celebratory: 'The wife of a woman? The expression sounds absurd, yet it is absolutely, literally correct'. He gives plenty of details about the wedding itself, in which Gilbert acted as best man, telling us that 'the female groom wore a dress suit; the bride was in her travelling costume'. He quotes the bribed minister as announcing to the press:

The groom gave me her – I mean his – name as Charles Hindle, and he assured me that he was a man. The bride is a sensible girl, and she was of age. I had no other course to pursue. I believe they love each other and that they will be happy.

Though the reporter is rather tongue-in-cheek, he does confirm that they were happy – except, he imagines, for their lack of children.

What neither of the two early reports mentions is who came up with the audacious notion of getting married in disguise – apparently a much more common strategy in the eighteenth century, which saw quite a few 'female husbands' jailed, than in the nineteenth. Stories of weddings between women nearly always present the 'wife' as innocent and deluded as to the sex of the 'husband'; what marks this one out is that it was clearly a joint venture. *Ladies & Gentlemen* makes the unseen proposal, rather than the wedding itself, the focus; this pushes Ryanny into the spotlight by offering her desire to marry Annie Hindle as the main motive, the thrust behind the story. The aim is to confound the audience's expectations about a butch/femme couple, to comic effect, by showing the yearning butch suddenly 'topped', stopped in her tracks after the first, longed-for kiss.

RYANNY: You only have to wait until we're married.

ANNIE: That'll be the day.

RYANNY: Name it.

ANNIE: Ho, ho, ho.

RYANNY: It's no joke. *(pushes ANNIE into a kneeling position)* 'My dear Miss Ryan . . .'

ANNIE: *(in an affected English accent)* 'My dear Miss Ryan, would you do me the inexpressible honour of giving me your hand in marriage?' *(stops, seeing RYANNY's face)* What?

RYANNY: Would you ever give over play-acting for one minute?

ANNIE: Let me get this clear. I've spent the best years of my life trying to find the courage to kiss you, and now you're proposing marriage?

The sexuality of the femme here becomes more intriguing than that of the butch. Annie's desire is easier to understand, because we see and hear it growing throughout the first half of the play; by comparison, Ryanny's emotions are discreet, covert, tucked away behind her conventional femininity. Ryanny does not experience any sudden revelation that she is a lesbian, in terms of her attitude to women in general, but when she falls in love with Annie she is forced to do some mental acrobatics and reinterpret her desire for a 'husband'. Trusting that God will judge her according to the spirit of the law rather than its letter, she plots to resolve her conventional life-plan and her unconventional desire by marrying Annie in front of a minister.

ANNIE: You'd have an easier life if you picked yourself a *regular* gentleman for a husband.

RYANNY: You're more of a gentleman than any man I ever laid eyes on.

Here the category of the 'gentleman' – the person who will treat the woman right – makes room for the butch.

There is an obvious danger, in retelling a story like this one, of celebrating marriage as such. It is one of the worst clichés of heterosexual literature that a proposal is the seal and proof of love. The current campaigns for same-sex marriage, about which I have many reservations, make me even more dubious about offering a lesbian wedding proposal as the theatrical climax of a love story. But the historical context makes all the difference. In 1886, two women living together would have been assumed to be platonic friends. To go to the appalling lengths of getting married, as Hindle and Ryan did, was just about the only way to say to the world – as well as to themselves – that they were joined together and not to be put asunder by any man.

Those writers who celebrate butch and femme of the 1950s and the 1990s often insist on the independence of these identities from male/female models. This is a healthy corrective to the homophobic cliché that lesbians are pathetic imitators of the real thing, and it also makes a lot of sense in the twentieth-century context; if you have bar dykes as role models, you hardly need to look to Mr and Mrs next door for advice. But in nineteenth-century cases like that of the two Annies, it is rather trickier to distinguish butch/femme from, if not male/female, then at least gentleman/lady, or husband/wife. In *Ladies & Gentlemen*, the models Ryanny draws on, in her conception of female partnership, are indisputably heterosexual and marital. But what matters is what Ryanny does with these sources, how she adapts the basic grammar of Victorian domestic life. What is interesting is the audacious adaptivity of women like the two Annies, simultaneously conservative and revolutionary, who carved themselves niches in the structure of a rigid society.

After their wedding hit the papers, they settled down in New Jersey, both in women's clothes, and got on very well with their neighbours for five years until Annie Ryan's early death. It seems that without benefit of any books on butch/femme theory, these two women came up with a unique way of marrying the genders.

King of the Hill: Changing the Face of Drag – An Interview with Dréd

SARAH E. CHINN AND KRIS FRANKLIN

The birth of the drag

Drag kings have arrived in New York. Their thick sideburns, lovingly applied beards, and gaudy noms de guerre – Mo B. Dick, Buster Hymen, Justin Case, Lizerace – call up images of exaggerated, burlesqued masculinity. Dréd is one of the few black drag kings. This is the story of how Mildred Gerestant, tomboy dyke from East New York, Brooklyn, became Dréd, Drag King of Manhattan.

I started performing December of 1995. What happened was, I was at the Pyramid Club on Avenue A [in New York]. My friend Dany Johnson invited me to a party and they had drag king shows there and I went once. I think the first drag king I saw performing was Buster Hymen. I was just amazed – I thought it was sexy, and powerful, and I was like 'I want to be up there doing that.' After that I would run into Buster Hymen in clubs and I was like 'I want to try that.' And she came over one day and put a moustache on me. And we were like 'Wow! Oh my God! Is that you?' So I experimented; I always said if I was a man I'd want to have a goatee. And Buster Hymen was having a drag king dating game and she asked if I wanted to be in it. I was really nervous, but I said yes. I was in the dating game and everyone was like 'Oh my God, you look so good. I didn't recognize you; you should do this, that . . .' I also met Mo B. Dick that night, and she told me about this contest that was going to be happening soon, and she said I should enter it. And I did, and I won. That gave me the courage to try some more. I also won the Drag King of Manhattan contest, which was at Her/She Bar in April '96. I was crowned Drag King, and it just started rolling.

Before that I hadn't performed in drag. One time there was this Halloween parade happening and I drew a goatee on my face. That was the first time I remember doing anything that looked like a man. When I was a kid I played with all the boys, you know, tomboy stuff. And then when I shaved my head, which I did before I even heard of drag – that was because I was just tired of doing my hair. I was very comfortable bald; I wasn't like 'Oh, now I look like a man' or anything. Of course, my mother don't like it. Sorry Mom!

I don't know if I would have thought about doing drag if I hadn't heard of it. I don't like putting limitations on myself to express my sexuality. And I like to get people to think about their own, too.

The drag queen scene is definitely a lot bigger than us – there's just so many and it's very competitive. At Club Casanova on Drag King Night a lot of us feel like we're family, because we help each other out with shows and perform together. And if someone knows about a shoot or something, she'll call other people. Maybe that will change in time as the scene grows.

She's got soul, and she's super bad

Dréd stands on the stage, huge Afro moving to the beat. Reaching underneath a brown, wide-lapelled leather jacket she adjusts her polyester shirt a little lower, swinging her hips in time to the music. She is the far-out private dick, John Shaft, lip synching to Isaac Hayes's funky sounds.

I like all kinds of music; I'm versatile in a lot of things. But one thing definitely is that I like the traditional old funky disco. I've always liked classics like 'Disco Inferno', 'Shaft', 'Superfly'. That's how come I like to look like that. I saw some of those movies when I was a kid, and when I was older, I was like 'Gee, I wish I lived in that era.' In a way now, when I dress up, I'm living, you know, in my own way, in that era.

The audience loves it. Most of the time they're all screaming. It really depends on how playful they are, what kind of day they're having. I was in front of this one audience and they were so quiet during the whole show. It was at [Crazy] Nanny's [a New York lesbian bar]. But I don't mean they didn't like it; it was just these women weren't expressing it. But I like when people express it, it makes me perform more.

I performed in Berlin and in Holland last year for gay clubs, and they had obviously never seen a drag king before, because they were all very quiet. And afterwards they said 'Oh you were good' and blah blah blah, but they were shocked. They were just shocked. They knew drag queens, but they had never seen something like this.

I'm just very proud of myself that I've done this, because as a child I was very shy, and I was very sad because of how I was treated by other people. And I was like sort of the ugly duckling; I didn't really have many friends. I have a hard time expressing myself, and so doing something like this, like I do now, was just unthinkable. But now I feel like, you want to do anything, you can do it, if you put your mind to it. It's different now.

[As I've been performing more and more] I've definitely started to loosen up, because I have a problem – I get so nervous that I'm stiff and I can't move as much because I'm so nervous about people liking it, or just scared. It's still like that sometimes.

Performing (as) Mil/Dréd

The music changes to the Commodore's 'Brick House'. Dréd mouths the words, 'She's a brick . . . house. She's mighty mighty, she's letting it all hang out,' as she pulls off her wig, revealing a shaved head. She unbuttons her shirt and slips it off her shoulders. She's strutting now, in a black leather bra and thick sideburns. Dréd reaches down into her tight pants, caressing the bulge there, eyeing the audience lasciviously. Then she unzips and pulls out a shiny green apple and takes a bite. The music is almost drowned out by the screams of the audience.

It's cool to just look in the mirror and play and see the transformation. You know, sometimes I look in the mirror after I get all dressed up and I'm like 'Damn!!!' Sometimes I just can't believe it's me.

I love gender bending – like I'll put my face in drag but then I'll have a shirt open and show the bra. So you know, this guy asked me once if I was pre-op [transsexual]; he thought I was a guy. I love playing with people's minds.

I like to make people think and show them myself as a woman, I have the courage to do this. Then I get on stage and I'll change clothes on stage. The only thing is I can't rip the hair off my face, because it's glued on. And I do it because if I don't, a lot of people think I'm a man, who are watching me perform. This woman heard me talking after the show, she was like 'Oh my God! I thought you was a man this whole time.' And I said 'Thank you!'

I'm honoured that I can be Dréd. Before I started I didn't think I could do that because my friends were like 'Oh, you're too pretty.' But you never know unless you try.

I want to show both sides of me. I've performed as Mildred, but in a play. I was so proud of myself as Dréd that I wanted to perform in other ways. I want to act in and out of drag. I love singing – I sang once as Dréd and I want to do more of it. But, yeah, I want to promote both sides of me.

I've always been into, you know, unisex clothes and a lot of the clothes I wear when I'm performing I wear as Mildred too. I was a tomboy as a child and I don't really wear skirts and dresses. I like funky stuff, you know, funky patterns. Dréd and Mildred, they dress pretty much the same. Like yesterday, you should have seen me yesterday. I looked just like Dréd, but my face wasn't in drag. I had my hat on, and my funky shirt . . .

I know one thing: straight or gay, they like seeing skin.

Mo B. Dick gave me the idea about eating the apple. I used to wear like a sock in there. And she said, 'You should put an apple in there.' One time I used a banana. And then another time I wanted to use candy and I would throw it out to the audience, but it kept falling out.

I have these fantasies that I would make love to a woman in drag. It hasn't happened yet. I've kissed a woman who was in drag while I was in drag. It was interesting with all that hair on our faces.

Are you attracted to drag kings?

Yeah! I don't have a type of woman. I like all types of women. I don't know what it would be like in bed to be in drag. I haven't done it yet. I won't label myself – I'm not femme, I'm not butch, it's just what I'm feeling at the moment.

My friend Turk – or Luscious – and I were performing at the Gay and Lesbian Business Expo on Columbus Circle [in New York]. And when we were done we said, 'Let's go outside and scare the straight people!' We had so much fun! I love doing that. We want to go out with a camera one day and just walk like on 8th Street with him in his tight outfits and me in drag and cleavage and everything. We do that all the time. That day a shoeshine man who was by where the Expo was was hitting on Luscious, offering him \$200 to go home with him. At first he thought Luscious was a woman, but when he found out he was a man, he goes 'I'll still take you home anyway, with them thighs and butt.' So I was like 'Leave my woman alone!' I remember walking on 8th Street with him and this cab driver turned the corner and was calling to him, like 'Come here, come with me.' Actually, cab

drivers love drag queens. I don't know what it is, but all my drag queen friends tell me these stories.

From bad to hard: hip hop masculinity and the modern black man

Dréd pulls on a black turtleneck, black pants, a black leather jacket and black sunglasses. There's a hard East Coast beat in the air now; she's taking us to the heart of Brooklyn, her home town. She's synching to 'Puff Daddy', throwing her arms out in the gestures of the hip hop nation. Her face is a study in hard black manhood. In the words of the hip hop mantra, she's 'keepin' it real'.

I don't want to be a man, but I love dressing up in drag. It feels very natural because I think I was a man once or something. I don't know. I have a lot of masculine energy which drag helps me to express.

I've been on the train, on the bus, on the street in drag. I took a friend out on a date once in drag.

Sometimes I'll know I'm a man; I have a hard time catching a cab when I'm dressed up as a man. The first time it happened I was so upset, because I had my sweatshirt on and I had it pulled down, you know, like. . . . So of course, you know, you can just imagine what the driver was thinking. So the cabs would come up to me and they'd slow down, and then they'd rush off. And it took me half an hour. Sometimes I have those problems as Mildred, but it's really bad in drag, because that's what it's like as a black man. I have a problem as a black man, no matter what I'm wearing. Once when I was waiting, this white woman stepped in front of me to try to catch a cab. And I just went off on her. And she went down the block. I said [drops voice] 'Yo! I was waitin' here!' And she got it and she left.

The cab incident has made me a little more sensitive to some men, and hear them talk about discrimination. But I don't really like men. I've never been with a man; I've known I was gay since I was a little girl, and I'm not attracted to men. Because I've seen so many of them be disrespectful to women and to me. I'm not going to make an effort to make friends with a man.

A lot of drag kings do the chauvinistic, disrespectful kind of man in their act. I don't do that because I'm not comfortable with it. I like to be a gentleman and a gentlewoman. That's the kind of man I'd want to be if I were a man. The drag kings that do the stereotypes, I don't know if that's the kind of man they would want to be if they were a man, but I don't know why they do that actually. Like Buster Hymen, she wears this dildo and she pulls it out and stuff. I don't think I could do that. I don't even wear one, not at the moment.

A lot of people tell me, which I agree with, that I make a good man and a good woman. That as a woman I'm very attractive, but in drag I can be so handsome and, like, I just look hot.

I have some male friends. I've always loved drag queens – all the drag queen friends I know I had before I started doing drag. I went to all their shows and followed them and everything.



Dréd (Del LaGrace, 1997)

My friend Ananda and I performed together to 'Boogie Nights' and we alternated verses of the song and then we started stripping. But before we stripped we played together like we were gay men. And if you didn't know, it was like it was really two gay men up there doing, like, you know. People thought it was hot. I thought it was too. I love seeing gay men, like kiss and stuff, because it's so sexual. But then when you also know it's two women inside kissing, and, you know, touching each other and helping each other take each other's clothes off. . . . Then she was taking her hat off and I was taking my Afro off, and her Afro is real and I'm bald, so it's like we switched.

I'm sure some of the drag kings are butch out of drag, but not everybody. Mo B. Dick, when she's not in drag, she's not butch. She sometimes wears skirts and make-up and everything. Some are like boyish, or even butch. And then Buster Hymen, she does drag, but she also performs as a woman, and sings live, and wears these little skirts and stuff.

You've got to work harder at being a drag king than a drag queen because in general men are boring. Women, we're exciting, we get to do all this stuff like dress up, even when we dress in men's clothing. But men, they're not exciting. It's true! They're not. So when I'm in drag I've got to do something that's fun.

Stone Butch

NICE RODRIGUEZ

Mitos wrapped a wet towel around her chubby face as police hurled tear gas at the students demonstrating at the plaza. Her eyes were bloodshot and weepy; her clothes wet and dripping from the fire brigade's attempt to disperse the crowd with powerful waterhoses. She tossed away the placard that read 'Marcos - Hitler, Dictator, Puppy', and ran to the bus terminal near the plaza where she met a fresh batch of protesters shouting 'Revolution!' and 'Hail the New People's Army!' The anti-riot squad surfaced from all directions, and she continued to run. She took the first bus that hurriedly left the station. She was finally safe, arriving home, shivering wet after several transfers from the province-bound bus. She greeted her partner, Dina, who brought her a towel to dry herself with. Her safe return was met with a warm kiss. Mitos went behind a bamboo divider and timidly removed her wet clothes as her lover took a furtive look.

'Butchy Patootsie,' Dina called the cause-oriented burly dyke. 'We've lived together for two years. Don't you think it's time you make love to me without clothes?'

'Are you complaining?' the tired dyke rumbled.

'Have I ever left you dissatisfied even if I'm wearing my Jockey?'

'Certainly not!' she answered. 'Your undies rubbing against my skin give me rashes. Look!' Dina showed a patch on her thighs which looked like prickly heat. 'Take your clothes off, Butchy. I want to see you naked.'

'Treat the rinse water with a few drops of vinegar,' Mitos wearily suggested, 'and my Jockey will turn soft as silk.'

'When we started, Butchy,' her lover coaxed her, 'I was ignorant. Now I'm ready to try anything. Let me touch you, Tootsie. Allow me to give back what you give me.'

'Oh, don't worry about me,' Mitos assured her. 'I don't ask anything from you except to stay.' She said she fucked with her brains, so she didn't have to drop naked in bed. Besides, Mitos reminded her, these were pressing times. The country was still under martial law. 'We have lost our freedoms!' she exclaimed. 'We can't say what we want to say. We can't believe the news. And all you think about is sex!' She went to her desk and wrote a freedom poem dedicated to all political prisoners.

Two years later, Mitos went home to a dark and gloomy place. 'Is there a brownout?' she called out to her lover whom she couldn't see.

'Butchy Patootsie,' a voice emerged from the bedroom. 'I have turned all the lights off so that you may remove your clothes and join me in bed. It's been four years since we've lived together, isn't it time you make love to me in the nude?'

'We have chosen an alternative!' the dyke yelled back at her silly sweetheart. 'Your fantasies are driving me mad. I can't even come home to a bright and cheerful house.'

'I promise not to laugh,' Dina vowed. 'Take your clothes off, my Smoochie. Don't you trust me?'

'I have fucked five women before you,' the dyke groaned while showing her five fingers. 'They never asked for anything more.' Mitos reminded her that these were difficult times.

The country's foreign debt was staggering, and cautious investors were withdrawing their capital. Brownouts caused by the energy crisis had disrupted the manufacturing sector. 'The prices of rice and fish have skyrocketed. The thumb-size bread I dip in my coffee is getting smaller and more expensive. There is crime and lawlessness on the streets and all you think about is sex!' She went to her desk and wrote a speech for a friend who would lead a women's march in the business district.

One night two years later, the dyke was awakened by someone removing her pajamas. She grabbed her molester and found out it was her lover.

'Butchy Patootsie, it's been six years since we've been together,' Dina sulked. 'Don't you think it's time I see your golden doughnut?'

'Damn!' Mitos bellowed. 'I can't even sleep in peace. If you don't stop, I'm going to have my own room built.'

'I know exactly what to expect,' Dina assured her. 'Disrobe for just ten seconds, dear Boobsie. If you think I will be disgusted and leave you for a man, you're wrong.'

'This pussy was only made for peeing,' the dyke responded. 'Now that you have disturbed me, I have to go to the washroom.' Before leaving the room, she reminded her girlfriend that these were oppressive times. She told her women and children were selling their souls. Thousands had taken to the streets to protest, blocking tanks with their own bodies. 'We are the world's lowest-paid workers,' Mitos continued. 'Politicians are buying votes to win. Seventy-five per cent of us live in poverty and all you think about is sex!' From the washroom, she sleepily went to her desk and looked at the pictures of an assassinated labour leader. She would distribute them to an anti-establishment newspaper in the morning.

Two summers passed and the temperature soared to an all-time high. To freshen up, Dina dipped herself in a cool bath and asked her partner to join her. Mitos removed her shoes and socks, then hopped into the round metallic tub.

'Butchy Patootsie,' Dina mumbled, 'it's been eight years that we've lived together, isn't it time you take a bath with me in the nude?'

'Naw,' said the dyke while scrubbing her foot with a pumice stone. 'When I finish bathing, my clothes will be clean, too. All I have to do is hang them up to dry.' She rose from the tub, hid behind a bamboo divider and changed into her dry clothes.

'Let me brush your back, my Coochie,' Dina chided her. 'Let me swim inside you.'

Mitos, already clothed, ignored her. She reminded her to conserve water because these were tough times. She said the country must face not only political disasters brought about by years of plunder by a ruthless dictator, but also natural calamities like typhoons, tidal waves, volcanic eruptions and earthquakes. 'Mounts Pinatubo and Mayon are raging mad,' the dyke added. 'Illegal loggers are leaving the forests bald. The exhaust fumes and factories are polluting the air. The gutters are stacked with garbage. And all you think about is sex!' She went to her desk and cleaned her gun. She and her fellow insurgents were planning to ambush a constabulary officer tomorrow night.

The ambush was unsuccessful and, in retaliation, the military placed Mitos and her group under surveillance. Two years later, the activist dyke disappeared and Dina looked for her in camps, where political prisoners were detained. She didn't find her pudgy partner, who was presumed to have been 'salvaged' – summarily executed – by soldiers. A few weeks later, a mass grave of decapitated women was unearthed in a suburban town. Their hands and feet were also chopped off. Dina walked along the rows of bodies that were lined up for identification. She stopped and wailed on one chubby corpse. 'Eeekee Yaakee Butchy! Is that you, my Tootsie?' she cried at the naked headless cadaver. 'Is it you? Ten years and I don't even have a clue!'



Mandy: Butch with Dildo and Gun (Anne Bungeroth, 1994)

Untouchability and Vulnerability: Stone Butchness as Emotional Style

ANN CVETKOVICH

When butches cry

This essay is about butches with big hearts. It is written from the heart, inspired by my own identification with butchness as an emotional style, that is, as a set of conventions for expressing feeling. Butch ways of showing feeling are often confused with not showing feeling at all and, hence, with not feeling or being affected at all. This chapter explores what it means to be touched, proposing that butch untouchability or stoneness can be an emotional, as well as sexual, category. Butch emotional untouchability is actually a form of vulnerability, but we can only recognize and be touched by it if we understand the expression of emotion to be a matter of style, a performance of interiority in which the display of feeling can take the form of not showing it.

The gender of butch emotional style is hard to categorize. I have long been interested in an apparent paradox of butch sexuality – that the butch who ‘takes erotic responsibility’ for her partner’s sexual pleasure could, in her eagerness to tend to another’s desires, as easily be considered feminine as masculine. Lee Lynch, for example, opens her poem ‘Stone butch’ with the question ‘Who is more womanly/ than the stone butch?’ and proceeds to ask, ‘Who practiced giving/ with more ardor?’.¹ The grammatical form of the question conjures up the equation of butchness and masculinity to which the poem is an implicit response. Lynch’s rhetorical tactic of associating butch generosity with femininity challenges those who criticize butchness as a misogynist rejection of femininity or a suspect form of male identification. The poem’s final stanza reads as follows:

They said she denied
her womanhood, when she was
their ultimate woman,
knowing only giving,
giving only good,
only good when giving:
womanly: stone butch.²

The poem’s play with the substitutability and reversibility of the words ‘giving’ and ‘good’ generates the equivalence of the terms ‘womanly’ and ‘stone butch’. The colons in the final lines emphasize the poem’s efforts to make its logic axiomatic. Through the chiasmatic reversal of the expected relation between butch/femme and masculine/

feminine, concepts that are frequently seen as mutually exclusive have become coterminous.

Perhaps even more difficult to explain than the butch's willingness to give is her unwillingness to get, to allow her lover to make love to her in return. Madeline Davis and Liz Kennedy's interviews with members of Buffalo's lesbian bar community reveal that in the 1940s and 1950s a butch's public reputation often depended on her untouchability and her honour was threatened if she was known to have been 'flipped' or fucked.³ Untouchability has been a vexed area of debate about butches, often stigmatized as a sign of pathology, rigidity, and (bad) male identification. Judith Halberstam challenges such views by noting the distinctiveness of stone butch sexuality as a form of sexual desire that is expressed in terms of limits or an articulation of what one does not want or will not do sexually.⁴ She further suggests that a refusal to be penetrated or touched in particular ways does not mean that butch lesbians do not experience sexual pleasure, including orgasm. Although unlike Lynch, she emphasizes the butch's masculinity (with the aim of articulating a specifically *female* masculinity), they share the desire to counter assumptions that have often been used to pathologize butchness. Significantly, then, gendering butches as feminine and as masculine can both be strategies for dismantling stereotypes and stigmas.

In addition to being ambiguously gendered, 'untouchability' suggests the wide range of meanings of touch. Halberstam, for example, disarticulates genital contact from other forms of physical touch in order to propose that butch 'untouchability' multiplies the possibilities of touch. I am specifically interested in the relation between emotional and sexual untouchability, which can be continuous but are not necessarily equivalent. To what extent does the stone or untouchable butch who resists being sexually touched, also resist being made to feel, in part because feeling is associated with vulnerability and femininity? Emotional untouchability can be the public side of sexual untouchability when the butch lesbian's (female) masculinity depends on and is defined by her refusal to be made emotionally vulnerable or to display feeling publicly or openly. This form of (emotional) untouchability plays an extremely important role in butch responses to homophobia and harassment. A stone attitude was a form of protection against the raids and arrests that were a regular occurrence in pre-Stonewall bar culture and against the harassment that butch women working in factories frequently experienced. Refusing to show that one had been affected by insults, strip searches, rape, beating, and other forms of psychic, physical, and sexual violence to which lesbians were subject was a significant form of butch resistance. Public vulnerability was a threat to one's dignity and one's safety.

'Untouchability' can thus be a public performance presented both to straight, homophobic culture and within lesbian culture, although its styles and reception may differ in each case. It also, though, has more private dimensions. The popular phrase 'butch in the streets, femme between the sheets', used sometimes to poke fun at or even ridicule a butch whose public untouchability was not consistent with her private or sexual behaviour, indicates untouchability's multiple forms as both social and sexual, both public and private style. Its variable meanings are related to the double status of 'touch' as both an emotional and physical category, to the metaphorical slippages that enable the physical dimensions of touch to stand for, or make material, emotional forms of power and that make it possible to refer to being emotionally affected as 'being touched'.

What is the gender of untouchability? Are you feminine as soon as you let yourself be touched? The Lee Lynch poem that links stone butchness with womanliness suggests otherwise. Lynch poignantly reveals the costs of butch generosity, associating it with the butch's ability to 'deny her own feelings' or even not to feel at all: 'To kill her own need/ she'd stop breathing/ before her body felt.'⁵ It is not just excessive feeling that is feminine; Lynch genders the butch's capacity to ignore or hide her own feelings as feminine. Moreover, the connections between physical and emotional sensation, between the cessation of breathing and the denial of feeling, facilitate the link between gender and feeling. Even as it genders styles of emotional expression, the poem also destabilizes any obvious configuration of their links.

The unpredictable links between butchness, emotional expression, and gender are the subject of another poem from *The Persistent Desire*, 'When Butches Cry', in which Bonni Barringer challenges the received wisdom that butches do not show feeling.

When butches cry
 They weep, they wail
 they gnash their teeth
 and moan

 Strong woman's pain
 it's just the same
 except it's mostly done
 alone.⁶

Barringer insists that butch feelings are not nonexistent but private. Resembling the strategy of Lynch's poem, Barringer's use of the phrase 'strong woman' reiterates the point that butches are in fact women despite their adoption of behaviour conventionally gendered as masculine. Crying is a public performance of painful feeling and often includes vocal and visible symptoms of emotion such as wailing, moaning, and gnashing the teeth. The only thing that distinguishes a butch's expression of pain from that of other women is that it is 'done alone'. It is a performance that externalizes feeling (and indeed suggests that feeling may exist only as performance) but has no audience. The butch's privacy, her isolation, her inability to make her feelings public in both intimate and more public contexts, lead to her misapprehension, including presumptions about her untouchability or her lack of feeling. In both Lynch's and Barringer's poems, the butch's burden is an excess of feeling that looks like no feeling at all; while the butch's feelings may be secret, they may also be unrecognized by those who seek a direct relation between internal and external emotional states, or that particular style of emotional performance in which the sign of big feelings is big expression.

These representations of butch feeling convey a sense that vulnerability is not a sign of disempowerment, but a privilege that is often unavailable and harder to achieve than the conventional stereotype of sentimental women would have it. By suggesting that the confinement of tears to a private space is a hardship, Barringer challenges the assumption that such secrecy is a face-saving source of strength. Moreover, the poem asserts that being a 'strong woman' and experiencing pain are not mutually exclusive, and it grants butches the power to be as expressive as other women.

Thus, if the poems' references to butch lack of feeling seem negative, it is important to remember that they are also valorizations of femme emotional styles, such as a receptivity to sexual attention or an ability to display feeling without shame.⁷ One of the powers of butch/femme relationships is the femme's sensitivity to the possible wariness or untouchability of butches. Mykel Johnson says that 'loving a butch woman also meant learning the places she held back, recognizing her hesitations with regard to receiving my caresses'.⁸ Providing an antidote to a public arena in which the butch must remain tough and invulnerable to homophobic attack, the bedroom provides a space in which loss of control or vulnerability means safety rather than weakness.⁹ The femme's ease with sexual expression or loss of control provides a model for the butch. Femmes can describe their butch lovers' fear of feeling in sympathetic ways that do not pathologize them. 'Being femme for me is linked to my treasuring of butch women, to my deep erotic need and hunger for the qualities that have banished her. To be femme is to give honor where there has been shame.'¹⁰

A callous around my heart

Must sexual untouchability mean emotional untouchability? In *Loving in the War Years* (1983), Cherríe Moraga very emphatically says yes. Significantly, though, Moraga understands butch lesbian feelings (or avoidance of feelings) as a response not just to norms of gender and sexuality but to histories of racism and colonization. She traces her butch Chicana lesbian identity to the myth of Cortes's mistress La Malinche/Malintzin, who betrayed the indigenous peoples by allowing herself to be sexually seduced and, hence, dominated. Also known as La Chingada, the fucked one, La Malinche's role as a sexualized emblem of colonization is consolidated by the symbolic significance of penetration as power.

Explaining her butch desire to avoid the experience of being penetrated, Moraga says: 'Nobody wants to be made to feel the turtle with its underside all exposed, just pink and folded flesh. . . . In the effort not to feel fucked, I became the fucker, even with women. In the effort not to feel pain or desire, I grew a callous around my heart and imagined I felt nothing at all.'¹¹ For Moraga, the physical dimensions of sexual acts have emotional, as well as sexual, meanings; she extends the imagery of the body/vagina's permeability to the heart and imagines not feeling anything as the physical effect of growing a callous around her heart.¹² Distinctions between being open and being closed are connected to distinctions between feeling and not feeling and are mapped onto the body by symbolic processes; physical touch becomes emotional touch, but the body also serves as the materialization of social processes. Being made to feel, and especially the physical or sensuous experience of being penetrated, is a rich locus of social meaning, and the physical and sexual are linked not just to the emotional but to conceptions of gender, sexuality, race, and nationality. Especially charged are the connections between penetration, public humiliation, and feminization.

Moraga's attention to the role of masculinity in race and national identity is one of the major contributions of *Loving in the War Years*. The book echoes another crucial text of race, nation, and sexuality, Marlon Riggs's film *Black Is, Black Ain't* (1995), which connects homophobia in African-American communities to a history of racist emasculations that have in turn given rise to a counter-discourse of black nationalism

that is intimately tied to styles of masculinity. Riggs is especially powerful in his exploration of the injunctions to deny feeling and the stone relations between fathers and sons, which structure male homoeroticism and the homophobic fear of penetration and feeling. For Riggs, the political stakes of emotional expression are high, a necessary part of the challenge of producing an African-American community that can embrace differences and resist homophobia and the rigidities of cultural nationalism.

The links Moraga makes between butch emotional style and the history of colonization complicate what might seem like the pathologizing perspective of her very strong equation of sexual and emotional untouchability, which leads her to describe butchness as limiting. In her important dialogue with Amber Hollibaugh, Moraga attributes her butch fantasy of maintaining control over a woman to a desire to be capturer rather than captured, and she speaks enviously about what it might be like to eroticize surrender:

I do have some gut-level misgivings about my sexual connection with capture. It might feel very sexy to imagine 'taking' a woman, but it has sometimes occurred at the expense of my feeling, sexually, like I can surrender myself to a woman – that is, always needing to be the one in control, calling the shots. It's a very butch trip and I feel like this can keep me private and protected and can prevent me from fully being able to express myself.¹³

Moraga is a butch who willingly expresses the desire to feel: 'So retaining my "butchness" is not exactly my desired goal. . . . I know there's a huge part of me that wants to be handled in the way that I described I can handle another woman.'¹⁴ Her comments very powerfully rewrite the stigmas against femme sexuality and against being made vulnerable.¹⁵ Moraga stresses her butch power to enable femme surrender and expression and to heal the deepest wounds. Moraga's account of butch discomfort complements Lynch's and Barringer's constructions of the butch as womanly because they all articulate butch identity in ways that do not demand a rejection of female vulnerability or womanliness, especially a femininity defined in terms of the capacity to feel.

Even as Moraga describes the rigidity of the links that equate fucker/fucked, masculine/feminine, colonizer/colonized, she also reveals those links to be the product of metaphorical slippages. Through a fantasmatic process the female body can be represented as a turtle with a hard protective shell and a pink fleshy underside; Moraga's use of a metaphor to represent vaginal penetration as vulnerability and her image of the heart with the callous around it indicate that the body is an imaginary locus of meaning, not a stable ground, although it is also a powerful vehicle for the materialization of symbolic meanings.¹⁶ Moraga's account of the rigidly binaristic meanings of feeling and not feeling, and of embodiment and disembodiment, is supplemented in *Loving in the War Years* by a range of alternative fantasies of hermaphroditic, monstrous, and bodiless selves. Working through the 'flesh of the fantasy', Moraga finds imaginative possibility in refiguring the relations among body, feeling, gender, and nation as she tries to answer the question 'what, indeed, must my body look like if I were both the chingada and the chingon?'¹⁷ As graphic and sensational as the cultural constructions that make penetration so meaningful, Moraga's fantasies of white doctors and sinister priestesses take her away from the body but also make imaginative use of it. Her return to the flesh and to feeling is prompted by her realization that in denying her body in order to avoid

feminized feeling, she is also denying her racial identity. The essay 'Lo que nunca pasos por sus labios' culminates in the image of a woman coming out of her mouth, 'hay una mujer que viene de la boca', an image that represents the expression of feeling as a physical movement from internal to external, an inversion of penetration.¹⁸ Moraga's understanding of butch sexuality as a response to colonialism's structures of feeling offers testimony to the difficulty of representing feeling in terms other than stigmatized notions of vulnerability. The value of butch discourse is its power to articulate experiences of feeling that are not castigated as feminine or expected to take forms associated with mental and emotional health, such as openness or expressiveness.

Feelings clenched like a fist

While Moraga claims that she does not feel at all, Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) suggests that butches may suffer from too much feeling rather than too little and that sexual untouchability need not mean emotional untouchability. Although there are many reasons for the popularity of *Stone Butch Blues*, including the butch survival and heroism of its central character and Leslie Feinberg's status as a spokesperson for transgenderism, I would argue that a major source of the novel's appeal is its emotional power, especially its use of sentimental and melodramatic narrative modes.¹⁹ Butch untouchability establishes a tension between private and public, and interiorized and expressed feeling that gives rise not just to the blues of the novel's title but to a melodramatic narrative. In addition to its associations with African-American culture, the blues have strong associations with both masculine and feminine traditions; naming *Stone Butch Blues* as melodrama installs it within a strongly feminized tradition.

Stone Butch Blues is structured as a letter that will articulate the feelings that Jess was unable to express to her ex-lover Theresa when they broke up, a parting prompted by Theresa's increasing commitment to lesbian feminist culture and her inability to support Jess's painful conclusion that she wants to take hormones and pass in order to circumvent the harassment and dislocation she experiences as a 'he-she'. The letter that Jess is finally able to write to Theresa many years later becomes the novel's first chapter, and it opens with a public expression of tears. 'I'm lying on my bed tonight missing you, my eyes all swollen, hot tears running down my face'.²⁰ *Stone Butch Blues* combines the public, but still personal, address of the letter with the more impersonal, and hence more public, address of a novel.²¹ Jess's shift to novelistic discourse in the subsequent chapters represents the painful fact that she cannot deliver her letter to Theresa. The more intimate form of expression generally available to ex-lovers is denied to her by the circumstances of their parting, which Jess's narrative reveals to be the product of historical circumstances, including homophobia, and not just personal differences. Feinberg thus reverses the hierarchy that assigns greater aesthetic significance to the more impersonal and more public genre, the novel, over the letter. For Jess, the novel is a letter *manqué*, the public discourse that stands in for the impossibility of private communication.

Jess's public expression of feeling represents a considerable achievement, since she has struggled with the sense that a central aspect of her butch freakishness is her peculiar emotional style. She tells Theresa, 'I don't think I have feelings like other people do. Sometimes you want me to talk to you about how I feel and I can't figure out if I'm

like other people inside. Maybe I don't have real feelings.'²² The novel's frequent references to Jess's inability and unwillingness to express her feelings suggest otherwise, indicating that not showing feelings is not at all the same as not having them. 'I hadn't really let myself feel anything about breaking up with Theresa until that moment. I almost cried out loud, but I clamped my emotions like a tourniquet. I had no privacy here, no space anywhere in the world where it was safe to grieve.'²³ In addition to its narrative of public harassment and physical violence, *Stone Butch Blues* is an intense drama of emotional anguish, borrowing the language of repression to render vivid the pain of unexpressed feeling.

Jess is particularly aware of her emotional stone nature in her relations with femmes, whose ability to draw out their butches, to create a receptive space for emotional intimacy, is still not always sufficient to melt her stone. Butch/femme is as much an emotional as a sexual interplay, in which the untouchable butch can be seduced by the femme's receptive sympathy. The emotional intimacy provided by a (femme) lover, which is also one of the forms of affective labour provided by heterosexual domesticity, provides solace for a range of forms of public experience, including not just work life but homophobic violence. Homosexual coupledness may well have a greater weight to bear in easing the emotional discrepancies between private, domestic life and other (emotional) contexts.

One of the most remarkable femmes that Jess meets is her friend Jan's lover, Edna. Upon learning about how Jan's untouchability led to their breakup, Jess wonders whether her own untouchability will ultimately affect her desirability. 'I obsessed about one thing Jan had told me: Edna prided herself on being able to seduce her stone butch lovers. I wondered how she did it. I wondered how it would feel to be touched and not be afraid.'²⁴ Jess is curious enough about Edna's seductive powers to flirt with her: 'I wanted to ask her to teach me how to let myself be touched.'²⁵ Out of loyalty to Jan and a sense of her own insecurity, Jess doesn't pursue her interest in Edna. But years later, after she has broken up with Theresa and has retreated into the isolation of passing as a man, she meets Edna again and they briefly become involved. Edna's femme power lies in her ability to see that, beyond the show of stone that Jess and other butches present to the public world and even to their lovers, they are extremely vulnerable. She says 'I love butches' hearts. But the ones I worry most about are the ones who aren't tough inside. . . . You and Rocco [another 'granite' butch] both had beautiful hearts that were so easily hurt, and I loved you for it. But I didn't know how long you could survive.'²⁶ Touched by Edna's femme understanding, her ability to see without having to be shown, Jess expresses her gratitude by writing her a poem describing how 'you touched my loneliness'.²⁷ She asks Edna, 'Was that expressing a feeling?', searching for the femme's affirmation that her butch style is 'real feeling'.²⁸

Even though she loves the power of femmes to encourage her expression, Jess must ultimately find her own language. 'Femmes always tried to teach me to talk about my feelings, but it was their words they used for their feelings. I needed my own words – butch words to talk about butch feelings.'²⁹ Jess's emotional untouchability is far more difficult to address than her sexual untouchability: 'When I shut down sexually, Theresa could always melt my stone. But when I turned into one big emotional rock, when I completely shut down like a slab of granite and needed her to chip away until I was free, she railed against me. It didn't work. I was still trapped in stone.'³⁰ Once Jess establishes her passing identity, she becomes increasingly closed and isolated. In one especially poignant episode, her male co-worker Ben reveals his own history to her in a moment of

butch bonding facilitated by Jess's ability to give him sympathetic attention without saying anything. (Femme receptivity and butch silence are interestingly similar.) Jess is unable to reciprocate Ben's intimacy, and the inequality of their exchange hurts him, because he is 'naked' and exposed while she remains 'closed and protected'.³¹ She recognizes in him her own emotional style: 'Funny how much men express in a few flat words. It was a butch's way, too, of revealing heart.'³² Foreclosed even from masculine modes of emotional expression, Jess experiences her extreme untouchability as a loss of self. 'The loneliness became more and more unbearable. I ached to be touched. I feared that I was disappearing and I'd cease to exist if someone didn't touch me.'³³

An archive of butch feelings

The emotional literacy that Jess ultimately acquires is a function of finding the cultural language to express stone butch feelings, including stone butch blues. Addressed as a letter to the femme who is capable of melting Jess's stone, the novel is grounded in a fantasy of the sympathetic reception that enables her to express herself, if only belatedly. But it is important that Theresa is a fantasy addressee, not an actual one, because the address thus becomes public, going beyond the intimacy of the couple. Furthermore, the letter sustains the intricate dynamic between speaking and silence that is ultimately the emotional stone butch challenge to simple dichotomies between expressing and not expressing emotion.

The 'heart' of Jess's letter is her memory of how she and Theresa responded to a particularly traumatic arrest. Jess's difficulty in expressing herself to Theresa is linked to their public life and their vulnerability to harassment. In one of the novel's most wrenching episodes, Jess is arrested and assaulted in jail by police officers. At least as painful as the physical and public violence, though, is Jess's inability to discuss what has happened with Theresa because even communication with her lover forces her to confront the humiliation she has experienced. Jess confesses that she never told Theresa what happened that night, and she doesn't tell us either. The sign of intimacy is not having to say everything, being granted the dignity of refraining from the trauma of rehearsing the pain and humiliation again. Theresa offers her the sanctuary of not having to expose herself in the way that she is too often forced to do publicly. The thought of her lover waiting at home helps her to survive the assault, but one of Theresa's acts of kindness is to leave her 'alone to wash off the first layer of shame. . . . You treated my stone self as a wound that needed loving healing.'³⁴ Jess articulates stone butch emotional style as a complex interplay between expression and withdrawal. If her letter is the place where she can reveal what she never said before, it also affords her the comfort of saying, 'Do I have to tell you every detail? Of course not.'³⁵

When Theresa cautiously enters the bathroom where Jess has been bathing her battered body, 'the terrifying image I had held back came flooding into the front of my mind: the memory of Theresa's face when I was arrested. In her eyes I had seen the pain of being overpowered and helpless. It was the way I felt almost every day of my life.'³⁶ Theresa's sympathetic recognition is almost unbearable for Jess. Watching 'the pattern of emotions on Theresa's face shift like sand dunes in the wind', Jess can find no words for what has happened, and Theresa has no words either but gives her the 'gentleness and safety' that she needs.³⁷

Later, in a moment that is prominent in both the letter and the subsequent re-telling of the Rochester arrest in the lengthier narrative of the novel, Theresa has a more vocal outburst of anger and frustration about not having been able to help Jess resist the police.

Theresa sat at the kitchen table, with her head in her hands. I noticed the level of whiskey left in the bottle. I pulled her head against my belly and stroked her hair. 'I'm sorry,' she kept repeating. 'I'm so sorry.' She lurched to her feet and fell heavily against me. I felt the frustration building in her body like a storm. I heard it in the small strangulated sounds from her throat. She pounded me with her fists. 'I couldn't stop them. They cuffed me so fast. I just couldn't do anything,' she cried.

That's exactly how I felt. We really were in this life together. We might not have the words, but we both knew exactly what we were choking on. There were so many things I wanted to tell her in that moment. Feelings worked themselves up to my throat and then stuck there, clenched like a fist.³⁸

In the letter version of this encounter, written in the second-person address, Jess admits to Theresa that she wanted to tell her about this moment of identification but couldn't.

I've always wanted to tell you this. In that one moment I knew you really did understand how I felt in life. Choking on anger, feeling so powerless, unable to protect myself or those I loved most, yet fighting back again and again, unwilling to give up. I didn't have the words to tell you this then. I just said, 'It'll be OK, it'll be alright.'³⁹

The letter reveals what she could not then articulate, her sense that she shares with Theresa the experience of inexpressible frustration. Difficult as it is to tolerate her femme lover's ability to mirror her feelings, Jess here acknowledges Theresa's understanding of stone butch feeling. The circuit of identification in which butch identifies with butch-identified femme can be completed when Jess is willing to acknowledge her own experiences of the pain that Theresa feels. Sometimes feelings are 'stuck . . . clenched like a fist'.

The letter is the 'butch words' that express 'butch feelings', as is the novel more generally. It is melodramatic, in the best sense of the word, because it expresses what is unspeakable, marks the terrain of what cannot be said.⁴⁰ It also exhibits the melodramatic structure of belatedness, of information that is revealed too late to be of use. The novel is the product of Jess's ability to risk a public audience for sentiments that frequently only find their way to lovers who are receptive listeners. But the letter's emotional power draws on the poignancy of its undeliverability.

Even though it can't be delivered to Theresa, Jess's letter has a destination. 'Since I can't mail you this letter, I'll send it to a place where they keep women's memories safe. Maybe someday, passing through this big city, you will stop and read it.'⁴¹ Jess seems to be referring here to New York's Lesbian Herstory Archives, and she imagines the public space of the archives as a place where her letter might find its destination. (In fact, the letter that begins *Stone Butch Blues* was first published in *The Persistent Desire*, whose editor, Joan Nestle, is also one of the founders of the Archives. It is somehow appropriate that one of the recipients of Jess's letter should be such a public and eloquent spokesperson for femme lesbianism.) The Lesbian Herstory Archives is necessitated by, among other things, silences, disrupted communications, lack of history

and documentation, and homophobia, all of which have both public and private consequences, including Jess and Theresa's breakup. It is not a traditional public archive, having struggled for its existence without the institutional sanction or financial support that creates public libraries. The Herstory Archives, and others like them, have been established from below in an effort to demonstrate that lesbianism has a history and to save materials that might otherwise be destroyed either because of overt hostility or because of ignorance. And in order to make erotic feelings the subject of archival history, the Lesbian Herstory Archives collects letters, diaries, flyers, and other ephemeral material that might seem personal or private. Jess imagines the archive's public space as one in which her lost lover might find her words; the archive thus has the potential to become a space for intimate communication.

It is remarkable that so public a place as an archive could be considered a safe place for Jess's letter. Her letter stands as a marker of so many other letters that were likely never written because there is no language, even a language of intimacy between lovers, to capture the affective experience of butch lesbians beaten and humiliated on the streets. Even when written, Jess's narrative contains emotional and experiential gaps – we do not really know what happened in that jail in Rochester. The archive of lesbian feeling must be big enough to hold these traumatic absences. They are the archival equivalent of the femme's ability to let her butch lover remain silent.

Public and private feeling commingle in *Stone Butch Blues*, since the public arena structures the private exchange of feeling, and the public expression of feeling does not always compensate for feelings that remain privately uncommunicated. Jess's untouchability cannot be read merely as an absence of public display, gendered (however questionably) as masculine; it is the sign of utmost vulnerability and a queer and passionate response to homophobia. Butch untouchability is a form of feeling that serves as a register of both homophobic and queer emotion even when it seems invisible. Not just in spite of, but because of, her untouchability, Jess has a heart.

Butch matters

I am aware that my interest in butch emotions runs somewhat counter to the current fascination with the variations on butch style represented by drag kings and FTM transgenderism. These forms of what Judith Halberstam calls female masculinity expand the possibilities for masculinities that inhabit a female body.⁴² They are compelling not only because they challenge the stability of the body, manipulating it by cross-dressing or surgical alteration, but also because they *use* the body and its materiality in order to make butchness and/or female masculinity concrete. More universalizing than minoritizing, to use Eve Sedgwick's formulation, a focus on butchness as emotional style claims butchness for a variety of subject positions and bodies, rather than investigating the limit points or borders where masculinity is at its most heightened.⁴³ But at the same time as it lends itself to the consideration of interior forms of identification, on the psychic butch or the butch within, emotional expression is also a matter of performance and display, the means by which internal states are made publicly manifest. To focus on butchness as emotional style thus keeps open questions about the interplay between internal and external forms of identity, between fantasy and its materialization.⁴⁴ The emotional stone butch may be far less flamboyant or visible than drag kings and FTMs,

but the fact that butch feelings expand the range of emotional performance to include lack of expression is a reminder that the relation between butchness and hypervisible styles of masculinity must remain unpredictable.

Hypervisible styles of female masculinity have recently become privileged sites of butchness because a fascination with materialized forms of masculinity is also a hallmark of queer theory's interest in those places where its abstractions are embodied in the flesh. In addition to emphasizing the emotional dimensions of butch style because they challenge expectations about gender and vulnerability, I am also motivated by a sense of the dangers of extrapolating or abstracting too quickly from butchness, or any lived identity, in the service of broader theoretical claims.⁴⁵ For example, Judith Butler has argued that the butch who exhibits feminine traits manifests a 'logic of inversion' that deconstructs the relation between gender presentation and sexuality.⁴⁶ This argument carries its full force only if we assume in advance a strict equation of masculinity and butchness. For some audiences, Judith Butler's work has provided powerful theoretical frameworks that make it possible to see butch/femme as something other than an imitation of heterosexuality and gender; but the texts of butch lesbianism that I have explored here do that and more, offering a density of detail and affective power that confounds not only stereotypes but abstractions. One of this collection's goals – theorizing lesbian gender – gives rise to a provocative ambiguity; is butch/femme in need of a particular kind of analysis in order to become a theory of lesbian gender, or does it constitute a theory already? If butch/femme is theory made flesh, then we must also attend to the ways in which the flesh transforms theory. The interplay between the emotional and the physical – their productive and destabilizing relation – provides an important analogy for the relation between theory and materiality. As material being, as site of contradictory feelings, the butch and her emotional styles may be a more forceful challenge to common-sense understandings than she is in theory's abstracted version of her.

'Real' Compared to What? Butch and Femme Contradictions in Greek Culture

NINA RAPI

Greek history is a litany of foreign occupations, wars and rebellions. Four hundred years of subjugation¹ under the Ottoman Empire were finally ended by legendary guerrilla armies, at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Greeks reacted to their loss of freedom – the effects of that reaction are still deeply ingrained in the contemporary psyche – either through fatalism, acceptance and collaboration, or cunning and double dealing, or secret cells of resistance and mythic acts of defiance. The mountain village women of Souli, for example, collectively committed suicide rather than submit. This century, Greece was ravaged by authoritarian regimes, a civil war and a military junta. It is only in the last twenty or so years that Greece has experienced a Western-type, two-party parliamentary democracy, of sorts. And it's during this time that lesbians organized politically as lesbians for the first time. The majority of Greeks still identify as Middle-Eastern rather than European or Western, even though they reject *and* celebrate the former, aspire to *and* ridicule the latter, while some Greeks bask in the glories of Ancient Greece and search there for a sense of identity. Greek lesbians likewise reflect these paradoxes.

Contemporary Greek culture, caught between east and west, is often two conflicting things at the same time: traditional and modern, authoritarian and anarchic, servile and rebellious, big-hearted and mean-spirited, community-abiding yet also deeply individualistic, sexually repressive *and* sexually highly charged. Greek attitudes to masculinity, femininity and lesbians therefore often reflect these contradictions. A butch dyke, for example, can be both ridiculed for being unfeminine, and revered for having *magia*, i.e. being tough, street-wise and having a code of honour.

If I had to use seven words to describe the Greek psyche, morality and ways of being and acting, and hence attitudes to sexuality, these would be: *Anthropia*, *Leventia*, *Filotimo*, *Magia*, *Rousfeti*, *Poniria*, *Rezili*. These qualities are admired in both sexes, in different degrees. A rough translation would read something like this: Be compassionate; be brave and honourable; be generous and dignified; be tough and defiant but also cool; or: be an out for your own skin bully; bribe and you shall get what you want; lie, cheat and steal and you shall go far; don't look/act different in any way or you'll be ridiculed to extinction. Ridicule is the Greeks' worst nightmare and best weapon of social control: by the family of individuals, by men of women, by straights of homos, by 'normal lesbians' of *dalikes* (diesel dykes), by any majority of any minority.

This essay is based on personal observations and on interviews I conducted over the past seven years, on three different occasions, all in Athens: in winter 1990, for the documentary *Greek Love and Sapphic Sophistication*, part of the lesbian and gay series

Out on Tuesday;² in the summer of 1994, for a similar but shorter article, I wrote for *Diva Magazine*;³ and in the summer of 1996, for this essay.⁴ I met the interviewees either through personal and professional contacts or through lesbian and gay organizations such as AKOE (Hellenic Homosexual Liberation Movement, 1990), EOK (Hellenic Homosexual Community, 1996) and the now defunct AOOG (Autonomous Group of Homosexual Women, 1990). The women ranged in age from their early twenties to seventies. Their occupations ranged from merchant marine and factory worker to shopkeeper, singer and TV producer (1990); from singer-songwriter and solicitor to unemployed graduate (1994); from unemployed athlete and student to translator (1996). The interviewees were interviewed both in conversational and in structured question and answer format, in groups and individually.

While there are social networks of lesbians and specific bars or cafes that lesbians frequent in other urban centres, especially in Thessaloniki, Athens – the focus of this essay – is the centre of any visible lesbian culture in Greece. Another 'centre', albeit transitory and rather removed from everyday reality, can be said to be Eressos in Lesbos during July and August. However, while a whole history of events and personal testimonies reveals a complex interaction between Greek dykes, 'the locals' and the 'colonization' of Lesbos by Western lesbians, it is beyond the scope of this article.

Identity: a 'Western import'?

A Western lesbian identity has not 'caught on' in Greece. It is seen by many as restrictive rather than liberating, an import that does not suit the Greek temperament. As Arleta, an alternative singer-songwriter with a subdued but lasting popularity since the 1960s, who makes no secret of 'preferring women' but does not define herself as a lesbian, has phrased it, 'Greeks are pansexual. They will sleep with whoever they fancy but won't define themselves from that act.'⁵ Arleta, like most Greek lesbians, is against a separate and fixed identity which she sees as creating rigid polarities, a 'them and us' mentality, which is destructive and regressive rather than progressive. Is this 'queer' thinking or is it simply fear of being named different? Because actually being different *and* defiant about it, is regarded as being OK. It is after all *magia*; which means you do what you feel and think is right, rather than what is expected of you. This commands both respect and fear; consequently it can further act as protection against lesbophobic attacks. A number of dykes I spoke to this summer insisted that the average Greek male would not dare to verbally or physically assault a lesbian who has *magia*.

Sotiria Bellou, one of the most enduring lesbian icons, a popular singer of *rebetika* (the equivalent of urban blues) since the 1940s, personifies this attitude. She has donned a classic butch image of slicked-back hair, dark glasses and *magia*, for decades, inspiring respect and admiration. Bellou has kept her cool style, defiant spirit and gravel voice as well as her high femmes, well into her seventies.⁶ She has inspired numerous emerging dykes with her uncompromising presentation of self as an *androgynika* (even though the word means a mannish woman and signifies 'lesbian', it also refers to any woman with *leventia*, i.e. a woman who is brave and has a code of honour). Legend has it that Bellou killed her first lover's husband but was acquitted on the grounds that it was a crime of passion.



Sotiria Bellou, circa 1950

'Real' by half

While *magia* in lesbians may be admired, 'lesbians' *per se* are not easily accepted. Deeply influenced by Orthodox Christianity and reflecting the dominant attitudes towards gender, where men can be excused for practically anything done in the name of 'manhood', while women can be condemned for practically anything that does not conform to the traditional notions of 'womanhood', Greeks can regard male homosexuality as 'weakness', hence forgivable, but 'lesbianism' as 'evil and immoral', hence unforgivable. The 'active' homosexual retains his manhood by virtue of being a 'top', while the homosexual 'bottom' can be pardoned his weakness because he is after all servicing the man. Besides, men can be allowed illicit pleasure while women are not even meant to want pleasure, let alone elicit it. Further, while the situation has changed in the past twenty years or so, certain long-held attitudes persevere regarding sex between men, which influence perceptions of homosexuality. There is an unspoken understanding that men will legitimately fuck other men when there is a shortage of women, for example in the army,⁷ in prison, or in small communities where there are strict moral codes regarding sexual access to women. It is almost a rite of passage that does not threaten precious notions of manhood. Lesbians, on the other hand, personify everything a woman is not supposed to be: rebellious, pleasure-seeking, independent of men. And perhaps it is the latter that is the most unforgivable sin in a culture that adores the male in such an idolising way. As Vagellio, a merchant marine, has put it, 'In Greece, it's better to be a whore than a lesbian'.⁸ Few women then actually identify as 'lesbian'. But who is a lesbian in Greek terms?

The Tegopoulos-Fytrakis Dictionary of 1993 defines the lesbian as a 'homosexual woman'. Legally lesbianism can be interpreted to mean 'unnatural debauchery', but the actual term 'lesbian' or indeed 'homosexual woman' does not appear in the Penal Code. Homosexuality in Greece has been legal since the introduction of the Penal Code in 1950 and constitutionally there is equality between men and women. But there are contradictions in law which can be used both for and against lesbians. For example, the age of consent is different for men and women, and effectively dictates that the age of seventeen constitutes the legal frontier for sexual acts between men, and fifteen for women.⁹ Even though it is not stated in those terms in the Penal Code, the law can be interpreted in this way because (male) homosexuality is legal and there is constitutional equality between the sexes. Also, while not directly referred to as a legal entity, lesbians can potentially be prosecuted under certain laws, officially meant for heterosexuals and/or homosexual men; if, for example, the sexual (lesbian) act 'causes a scandal' (article 353 of the Penal Code), if threat or violence is used for the sexual act (article 336 of the Penal Code), or for the seduction of a minor (article 339 of the Penal Code). However, according to AKOE, the oldest gay organization in the country, this has rarely occurred. While you cannot prosecute that which is not supposed to exist, it remains to be seen whether these laws will be used in the future as a backlash to the increasing visibility of lesbians.

On the popular front, while a man is a 'real' homosexual when he is sexually passive, a 'bottom', a woman is a 'real' lesbian when she is sexually active, a 'top'. The active man – the one who fucks – is still a 'real' man, a straight man. The passive woman – the one who is fucked – is still a 'real' woman, a straight woman. These are not just popular beliefs amongst straights, but also amongst non-politicized lesbians. H. B. for example, a shopkeeper, who has had a relationship with a 'lesbian' for twelve years, still regards

herself straight, because she has been sexually passive.¹⁰ By contrast, nearly all the other women I spoke to asserted that they interchanged 'active' and 'passive' positions/acts sexually. Katerina, an unemployed athlete and a self-defined 'boy', further claimed there are very few top lesbians: 'all the lesbians want to be made love to, that's the problem',¹¹ she lamented. That includes herself, a 'boy'. A 'real' lesbian then is hard to find!

What then defines a 'real' lesbian beyond an assumed sexual topness? In popular discourse she is an *androgynika*. The singer Bellou personifies the classic *androgynika* in the popular imagination. The lesbian, then, is perceived to be masculine and marked by assertive and defiant gestures and ways of occupying space. Certainly dykes with *magia* correspond to these popular perceptions of 'the lesbian', but the majority would not call themselves *androgynika*. Lesbians have other ways of describing and identifying each other.

The extremists: from dalikes to carnivalesque women

What are the different Greek lesbian 'types'? There are the *dalikes* (the diesel dykes), who are predominantly working-class and hang out with *carnivalesque women* (which is how high femmes are referred to); sophisticated dandies who 'show it' but 'don't declare it' and look for 'cool ladies' or other dandies; butch merchant marines with a feminist consciousness, like Vagellio, who are 'not into roles' but always go for femmes; and young 'boys' in search of Mommies, Strict Madams or other boys. There are the 'bourgeois' lesbians, who favour classic femininity with just that little give-away sign here and there. Like, for instance, the penetrating and knowing 'sapphic' look, the short (it's fashionable, darling) hair, the confident posture, the low, been-around voice, the smart trouser suit. There are also a few feminist lesbians, predominantly middle-class, who reject roles as reactionary and identify either as 'woman' or androgynous. They perceive 'woman' as an anti-ghetto subjectivity and androgyny as a progressive identity.

While there are masculine and feminine lesbians who define themselves and each other as such, the butch/femme dynamic as a concept does not actually exist in Greece. Further, while I would have interpreted as butch/femme a number of couples I have encountered, very few of the women I spoke to believed themselves to be part of such a dynamic, regarding it in general as anachronistic. Also, a butch/butch dynamic appears to be more prevalent recently amongst younger and working-class women; while a femme/femme dynamic appears to be favoured by bourgeois lesbians. I use these terms in the British sense and not as they would be referred to in Greece. Here, women would use the word 'feminine' or 'womanly' for femme, 'boy' or 'masculine style' for butch.

Extremes of butchness or femmeness, though, like *dalikes* or *carnivalesque women*, are viewed as undesirable and deeply embarrassing. Katerina, for instance, asserts vehemently she wouldn't be seen dead with 'a carnival'. The girlfriend may be feminine, but has to have some *magia*. What is considered attractive is a floating, i.e. non-gender-specific masculinity, as personified in *magia*. However, there also have to be external signs of a floating femininity, as personified in *anthropia*, i.e. compassion, sensitivity and modesty. It is important that these qualities are both embodied within and performed in

public, but not too 'extreme'. Excess means that you have lost your sense of mean and measure, perhaps even your code of honour/principles, and most importantly your allegiance to certain bond-creating cultural values, as may be seen to be the case with *dalikes*. Katerina, like many other lesbians, is against *dalikes*, perceived as having taken *magia* to extremes and hence losing their cool and becoming 'a joke'. Further, she asserts, they put pressure on other dykes to do the same, because the moment you walk into Odyssia, one of the longest-running lesbian clubs in Athens and full of *dalikes*, you have to become one yourself to stand your ground. Extreme butchness then becomes an arena of power and competition as well as a necessary 'act' of survival in certain spaces.

Politics and subcultures

While a Western lesbian identity has not developed in the same way in Greece, lesbian subcultures have existed since the 1940s, mostly in urban centres. These usually developed around bars/clubs. Bars are frequented by either 'artistic types' or 'the underworld', the two sections of society where lesbians in Greece have traditionally been able to express their sexual desires and still be accepted, to a degree. Since then, there have been popular 'out' singers. What 'out' mostly meant in the 1940s, and still largely means today, is making no secret of being an *androgynika*, or of 'preferring women', but not 'naming' it exactly either. Sotiria Bellou and Arleta are prime examples. Neither is officially 'out' but both have been lesbian icons for decades and are identified and known by the average Greek as 'lesbian'. Recently, a younger and more upfront lesbian icon has claimed significant cultural space, the massively successful singer Alkistis Protopsalti. She not only re/presents herself as a dyke (short, slicked-back hair, suits, *magia*), but it is common knowledge, disseminated through popular weekly magazines, that she has a summer house in Eressos, Lesbos, read by the public as a declaration of her lesbianism.

Lesbian feminist political activity developed and peaked in Greece between the mid-1970s and early 1980s, when dykes organized demos, meetings, discussions and produced three issues of the lesbian magazine *Lavris*, all in Athens. Internal group differences combined with a general decline of interest in political activism and the institutionalization of feminism through the coming into power of *Pasok*, the socialist party, led to the demise of the lesbian-feminist movement. The majority of lesbian activists either withdrew due to fatigue or were assimilated by government subcommittees focusing on 'women' and erasing 'the lesbian'. In 1987 another effort was made to create a new lesbian group, but a bar was set up in its place instead. No



Alkistis Protopsalti (Thanasis Kaloyiannis, 1996)

more independent lesbian groups have emerged since then. As was written in *Madam Gu*, the new lesbian magazine launched in 1996, which has so far produced three issues, 'the lesbian community has not "moved" since then'.¹² Bar and cafe life is where it has moved to; its natural habitat, it seems, judging by the historical development of lesbian subculture here. Perhaps, and this is pure speculation, a new movement may now emerge focusing on art, film and performance produced by lesbians. I base this speculation on the new confidence dykes in Greece demonstrate, the need for a 'group feeling' I have observed, the fact that there are many lesbian artists working in isolation, and the increasing willingness of the media to cover 'lesbians'.

'Model' lesbians

In common with Western countries such as the UK and the USA, in the past three years, mainstream print media in Greece has gone lesbian-crazy. Practically every popular magazine has had articles and photo spreads on lesbians. Some do more. *Colt*, an interesting glossy monthly, edited by a female left-wing intellectual and mixing soft porn with astute political and cultural analysis, is sold in every kiosk in the country; and it features regular pages on music and popular culture by Helen Tsaklari, a self-proclaimed vberdyke. Her pages often report lesbian and gay news and events.¹³ *Klik*, another glossy monthly sold in every kiosk in the country, had a special issue on lesbians in March 1994, exceeding London's *Time Out* by more than a year. It consisted of an eighteen-page spread of text and images that would not be out of place in *Diva* magazine, if slightly more explicit – some of the text would befit a soft-porn fanzine. The images here are predominantly femme, but some limited space is also given to stylish butches. The question is, what relation do these mainstream images bear to the average Greek dyke?

The dyke and her shadow

The flip side of the mainstream Western obsession with lesbian chic has been the creation of new stereotypes, a sort of global lipstick lesbian with a plastic smile and even more plastic personality. Interestingly, though, what appears to have happened simultaneously is a certain masculinization of the lesbian subculture, especially obvious with the rise of the drag kings in London, and of dykes with *magia* in Athens. While *magia* has been the trademark of the lesbian since the 1940s, the 'obvious' lesbians have not been many. What I have observed in the last few years, however, in the lesbian and/or lesbian-friendly bars and cafés and the streets of Athens, is that dykes with *magia* have increased considerably. They are much more 'out' in costume, stance and attitude if not in name; and their number is growing fast. It is as though the dominant culture manufactures the femme while the subculture counter-creates the butch. But while the media lesbians are defined by conformity, i.e. looking and acting just like straight women, the subculture's dykes are defined by defiance, i.e. *magia*. And *magia* means taking no shit and standing your ground, but also mutual respect and coolness. In other words, you don't go around harassing people or throwing your weight about, but if anybody invades your territory or disrespects you, there will be war. So *magia* acts as both a peace-keeping deterrent and, failing that, as self-defensive attack. That's the spirit, girls: Resistance!

The Hegemonic Regulation of Butch Performance: *Regina v. Saunders*¹

ANNA MARIE SMITH

Mr. Kelson, for the Prosecution, cross-examining Jennifer Lynne Saunders:

Q. You were not wearing makeup when [Doe's father] just happened to drop in?

A. I do not have to wear makeup.

...

Q. You could not forget you had shown Mary your vagina and breasts?

A. There is a lot of things I have not said.

Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless because they cannot think new thought.

— Salman Rushdie

One of the predominant tropes in contemporary lesbian, gay and bisexual studies is a voluntaristic interpretation of Butler's performative gender theory. Butler states, 'That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.'² For Butler, gender is nothing but the sedimented effects of repeated practices, such that the apparently 'natural' and 'unnatural' actually have the same ontological status. Every 'original' is actually the copy of a copy, there is no absolutely 'true' gender which can be used as a neutral standard to dismiss 'false' genders, and so on. Where many other feminist theorists interpreted biological sex as given, and gender as the contingent interpretation of sex, Butler's Foucauldian approach made this sort of ontological dualism impossible.

The anti-foundationalist approach to gender construction can be articulated with many different theoretical formulations. Many writers have seized upon Butler's texts to legitimate the idea that anyone can make up their identity as they go along according to their freely self-determined individual will. In political terms, this interpretation is problematic and even disastrous. While it is true that no one ever fully occupies a subject position, and that alienation is universal in the sense that no one ever achieves a sense of being 'at home' through identification, some subjects have access to the resources

that offer some degree of compensation for this universal condition, while others do not. Further, some subjects achieve a semblance of stability, normalcy and social belonging precisely by demonizing or excluding others.

What Butler's thesis ought to open up, then, is an exploration of the power relations through which some identities are normalized and naturalized while others are demonized and excluded in specific historical contexts. We cannot find any traces of an endorsement for the voluntaristic approach to identity formation in the genealogical precedents for Butler's work, such as Nietzsche on *ressentiment*, Foucault on disciplinary power, Searle and Derrida on speech act theory, and Freud and Lacan on identification. Butler herself has consistently placed performative practices within the context of asymmetrical power relations – not only in her more recent work,³ but also in her earlier texts. Commenting on de Beauvoir in *Gender Trouble*, she states, 'Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.'⁴

We also need to pay attention to the contexts in which interpretations are performed. A voluntarist misinterpretation of Butler's theory is extremely useful for the more reactionary forces in lesbian, gay and bisexual politics today. During the American gays in the military debate, for example, neo-conservative gay leaders rushed to embrace gay patriotism – this in a viciously imperialist country. During the family values debate, they now rush to embrace gay marriage – this in a country that is declaring a racially motivated war on poor single mothers on the basis of their marital status. And they do all of this in the name of 'gay rights'.

Voluntaristic arguments can be deployed to bolster these strategies by winning legitimacy for them and foreclosing the sorts of critical analyses of state apparatuses, official discourse, and class and race differences that might lead to entirely different political positions. If we took seriously, for example, the way in which the official regulation of kinship ties is currently linked to privatization and the downsizing of collective responsibility in the globalizing economy, then we would have to accept that the demand for inclusion within the married class for sexual minorities is extremely complicated. But no one is speaking about the fact that every American ought to receive adequate health care benefits and reliable pension plans, not simply the officially recognized partners of employees with decent work contracts. No one is wondering why so many heterosexual women in America experience a tremendous drop in their standard of living after their divorces. No one is speaking about what would happen to the less wealthy partners in gay marriages after gay divorces. We could try a completely different political strategy. Lesbians, gays, bisexuals, unmarried heterosexual couples, single parents and divorced heterosexual women could form coalitions with welfare recipients and the poor to demand a complete reform of official kinship regulation and equal access to public goods and resources for every American that would make inclusion within the married class immaterial. The voluntaristic idea that subject positions, from masculinity to patriotism to marriage, can be reconstructed according to individualistic wills is helping neo-conservative gays and lesbians to keep these issues off the agenda.

The four narratives

If the voluntarism approach can be mobilized to legitimate problematic political strategies, it also cannot adequately account for the structural limitations that are faced every day by the disempowered. The trial of Jennifer Saunders is a case in point. Saunders was tried and convicted for indecent assault in a British Crown Court in 1991. The prosecution successfully argued that Saunders had engaged in consensual sexual relations with two young female partners, but that she had obtained their consent through fraudulent means in that she had passed as a man throughout their interactions. Saunders allegedly misrepresented a dildo as a penis in penetrative sex with the complainants. In handing down a sentence of six years in a young offenders' institution, Judge Crabtree claimed that with the 'emotional damage' caused by Saunders, the two young women 'would rather have been actually raped by some young man'. The Court of Appeals basically upheld the original Crown Court decision and merely reduced the length of her sentence.

When I wrote two earlier articles on this case,⁵ I had access only to official transcripts of the Crown Court and Court of Appeals judgements. Based on these short documents and a genealogical reconstruction of the official representation of lesbianism in Britain, I argued that it is entirely logical that a court of law would not accept the idea that Saunders' partners had knowingly consented to have sex with another woman. The hegemonic erasure of lesbian subjectivity meant that there was no authorized position from which Saunders could have given a credible explanation for her gender impersonation. To make matters worse, Saunders herself was a working-class juvenile delinquent from a broken home, and her partner's homophobic parents were outraged when they discovered Saunders' actual gender. Saunders' credibility was ruled out from the start.

With the full transcript of Saunders' trial before me,⁶ I would now argue that there were four rival accounts for Saunders' relationships. First, the prosecution basically argued that Saunders had passed as a man throughout the two relationships in question. Second, the defence argued that no sex whatsoever occurred between the women. Late in the trial, a social worker claimed that Saunders suffered from a multiple personality disorder, and implied that she should be found innocent by reason of insanity. Finally, Saunders argued much later in a short interview with the gay press that she had had a fully consensual lesbian relationship with one of the women, and that she had only passed as a man to conceal their lesbianism from her lover's parents. I would now have to admit that serious questions could be raised about every one of these narratives. In the end, however, it is clear that the prosecution did not provide adequate proof of Saunders' guilt, and that the Crown's account prevailed only because it was supported by sexist and homophobic ideas about gender norms and women's sexuality.

The prosecution: when cross-dressing becomes sinister

Saunders' indictment alleged that she indecently assaulted Mary Doe between 27 January and 29 May 1990, and that she indecently assaulted Susan Brown on 15 May 1990. Saunders pleaded not guilty. Her indictment did not include a rape charge since, under

English law, rape only occurs where there is vaginal penetration with a penis. Indecent assault generally refers to the deliberate touching of another person without his or her consent in circumstances of indecency. It also refers, however, to cases in which a person's consent to sexual practices is obtained through some sort of 'fundamental deception' about those practices. The deception in question has to go to the very basis of the sexual relationship in question. A sex partner who gives a false name or lies about himself or herself does not commit 'fundamental deception', even if the other sex partner would not have consented to sexual acts if she or he had known the truth beforehand. A man who obtains a woman's consent by impersonating her husband would, by contrast, commit what the courts call 'fundamental deception' because the very nature of the sex acts in question would be transformed through that deception. For the legal system, sex with a liar and adultery are two different things altogether. To prove Saunders' guilt, the prosecution had to demonstrate that Saunders had indeed engaged in sexual practices with the two women complainants, that Saunders had passed as a man successfully throughout her interactions with the two women, and that the two women had only consented to sex acts with Saunders because they thought that she was a man. Finally, the prosecution had to prove that Saunders' gender impersonation constituted a 'fundamental deception' that transformed the very nature of the alleged sex acts. If 'fundamental deception' exists when impersonation allows the deceiving party to pass adultery off as marital sex, then perhaps it would also exist where homosexual acts were misrepresented as heterosexual acts.

Under questioning by the prosecution, Doe stated that she met Saunders during her mother's birthday party at the Labour Club in Rotherham on 27 January 1990. We should note in passing that Doe's date of birth is 19 May 1974. She was fifteen during most of the alleged sexual relationship with Saunders but turned sixteen just before the end of the relationship as it was specified in the indictment. Although the prosecution attempted to broaden the charges against Saunders to include sex with a minor, Judge Crabtree ruled that this would allow the prosecution to rewrite the defendant's indictment. In any event, any charge related to the age of consent would have introduced the difficult question of the status of lesbian sex in British law.⁷

According to Doe, Saunders was introduced to her on 27 January 1990 as 'James



Jennifer Saunders (*Sun*, 19 September 1991)
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Lee Saunders'. They played pool, danced together and made a date to meet the next day. During their date, Doe brought Saunders back to her home, where, in the otherwise empty house, they talked and kissed. Saunders saw Doe virtually every day from then on. Saunders allegedly told Doe that she had a sister named 'Jennifer' who lived in Lincoln and that 'his' parents had died in a car accident. Saunders was apparently welcomed into the Doe family home as Mary's new boyfriend.

P. Kelson, appearing for the prosecution, questioned Doe about her feelings for Saunders. Throughout this exchange, Kelson and Doe referred to Saunders exclusively in terms of masculine pronouns. Incredibly enough, M. Robertshaw, appearing for the Defence, followed their lead when referring to his own client during cross-examination. Doe replied that she felt 'strongly' about Saunders, and had feelings for her 'like you do when you go out with somebody'. Kelson then proceeded directly to ask a series of questions about Saunders' masculine appearance.

Q. What sort of clothes do you remember he used to wear?

A. Baggy ones. Shorts, T-shirts, jeans, jumpers [sweaters]. Always baggy T-shirts.

Kelson placed a great deal of significance on what we lesbians would call Saunders' butch aesthetic. He later questioned Doe's father closely on Saunders' dress to underline her preference for baggy anorak coats, trousers, T-shirts and sweatshirts. When Detective Constable Moon took the stand, he quoted from the police interview with Saunders that took place at the time of her arrest. The police noted that Saunders had a short haircut and several tattoos on her arm. Under police questioning, Saunders admitted that she was not wearing a bra and did not own any women's clothing. Instead of recognizing that Saunders' style was a wholly legitimate mode of dress – especially in 1990, when grunge, house and hip-hop styles had made baggy clothes and androgynous dress commonplace – Kelson effectively suggested that there was something very sinister going on behind her appearance.

Kelson then led Doe through a series of questions about her sexual relationship with Saunders. The couple had kissed and cuddled in the company of the other Doe family members on countless occasions. Doe told the court that as their relationship became more serious, Saunders had fondled her breasts and had penetrated her vagina with her fingers. Doe also claimed that Saunders had never taken off her underwear in her company, and that although it had appeared that she had had what Doe called an 'erection', she had not allowed Doe to touch her genitals. Doe claimed that they had 'made love' on regular occasions later in their relationship. She stated that Saunders had not allowed her to keep the light on during their love-making.

With reference to the first night of their love-making, Kelson asked,

Q. Before he [*sic*] was lying on top of you had he come straight into the bedroom with you or had either of you been on your own for any length of time?

A. He had gone into the bathroom for a couple of times before.

By introducing this moment of discontinuity, Kelson was able to plant the idea that Saunders had had ample opportunity to don a dildo that she would then pass off as an erect penis.

Arriving at what is perhaps the most disturbing part of the trial, Kelson asked Doe about her impressions with respect to their love-making. Doe claimed that Saunders had hurt her vagina when she tried to penetrate her. She stated that Saunders had told her that she had had a fragile tube fitted inside her 'penis' at the age of fourteen to help her to ejaculate. (No one expressed surprise that the National Health Service would take such a keen interest in the ejaculations of a fourteen-year-old working-class youth.) Saunders had supposedly told Doe that she did not want Doe to see her 'penis', and that she needed to hold her 'penis' herself to keep the tube from breaking. Doe stated that Saunders had made several efforts to penetrate her but that the penetration had continued to cause her pain. On that first occasion, they eventually gave up, but Doe claimed that they had 'kept trying on several occasions'. Kelson asked Doe about their subsequent experiences.

Q. On other occasions, and we do not need to go into all the details about the other occasions but how did it go? Did you succeed on the other occasions?

A. Yes.

Kelson displayed some sensitivity with respect to Doe's embarrassment on the stand, but on a highly selective basis. Doe was thereby allowed to establish Saunders' gender impersonation and sexual conduct with her, but to avoid questions about Saunders' ability to pass the dildo off as a penis on a regular basis. Under Kelson's questioning, Doe claimed that Saunders had never allowed her to touch her genitals, but that at one point she had felt what she thought was a 'penis' through Saunders' clothes. She also alleged that when she had 'felt a lump' on Saunders' chest, Saunders had pushed her away and had explained that she had a cancerous boil there.

At the end of her testimony, Doe stated that she had broken up with Saunders as soon as her parents told her that Saunders was female on 29 May 1990. Kelson asked her to reflect on her feelings about her relationship with Saunders.

Q. Now you have, I think, been given to believe that James was in fact a girl [*sic*] by the name of Jennifer and how do you feel now?

A. Disgusted.

Q. Would you have had any sexual relations with that person if you had known that they were a girl?

A. No, none whatsoever.

The issue of Saunders' visual appearance re-emerged at several points in the trial. Brown claimed that she met Saunders as 'Jimmy' at a youth job-training scheme. Under cross-examination, she admitted that the training staff called Saunders 'Jenny'. Robertshaw, in an apparent attempt to cast doubt on Brown's ignorance about Saunders' gender, allowed Brown to reinforce the idea that Saunders had deliberately chosen to wear clothes that concealed her body.

Q. And this person you knew as Jimmy at work used to wear jeans and T-shirts?

A. Pardon?

- Q. Used to wear T-shirts?
- A. No, he used to wear a white shirt with a baggy coat over, beige baggy coat.
- Q. He would wear T-shirts and jeans and you could see quite clearly from this person's physical attributes that he was female?
- A. I could not because he had his coat on all the time.
- Q. You say all the time. Winter and summer?
- A. Yes, that is all he wore. He was wearing that coat all the time.
- Q. Never had the coat off?
- A. No, not even in the house.
- ...
- Q. You say you never on any occasion saw Jimmy dressed any differently?
- A. No, except for when we went to The Wellington pub and he had a white shirt on and a tie.

Not knowing what to do with this young woman who wore a shirt and tie, Robertshaw moved on and attempted to make Brown admit that she was lying about Saunders' dress. No one ever made the argument that Saunders wore a tie because she was a proud butch on a night out at the pub with her lover, Mary Doe.

The defence: a chaste friendship misconstrued

The defence argued that Saunders had not had any sexual interaction with Doe and Brown whatsoever. Saunders told the court that she had indeed met Doe on 27 January 1990 and that her friend Peter had played a joke on Doe by introducing Saunders to her as 'James'. Saunders claimed that during the following week, she told Doe several times that she was female, and that her friend had introduced her as 'James' or 'Jimmy' as a joke. She stated that she had settled the matter once and for all by showing Doe her breasts and her genitals.

There were many pieces of evidence, however, that were brought forward by the prosecution that contradicted this account. This evidence included various written materials. Saunders had apparently signed the cards that she gave to Doe's parents and sister on their birthdays, and to Doe's aunt and uncle on their silver wedding anniversary, with the name 'James'. Doe had also given the police a blue exercise book that contained her personal diary and poetry. Doe claimed that Saunders wrote various declarations of love and sexual attraction in the notebook. Saunders allegedly wrote, for example, 'I know I want you, and you wanted me, and look what has turned out. Two young teenagers in love'; 'James Lee Saunders loves Mary Doe'; and 'Let's make love all the time. I love you and will always. Will marry you.' Finally, the prosecution presented a note allegedly

written by Saunders that stated, 'Mary you finished with me so now I have gone. I'm not going to go back with you so don't come to my flat. Love Jimmy. P.S. I still love you.'

Through his cross-examination of Doe, and his questioning of Saunders herself, Robertshaw developed the following explanation for the contradiction between the allegedly non-sexual friendship between Saunders and the notes that proclaimed the love of 'Jimmy' for Mary. Doe had been the one who pursued Saunders after meeting her at the Labour Club. Discovering that Saunders lived at Rush House, a youth shelter, Doe went there, pressed the buzzer, shouted out for Saunders, and generally made a nuisance of herself. Saunders told her to go away, but Doe returned on several occasions. After Saunders finally established once and for all that she was female, it was too late for Doe. She had already told her family and friends that Saunders was her new boyfriend. She was too embarrassed to admit that she had mistaken Saunders for a male and that she had concocted the entire story about Saunders being her boyfriend. And so she asked Saunders to pretend to be her boyfriend to save her reputation. Saunders – who, according to this account, is a heterosexual woman acting in the role of a helpful friend – supposedly agreed to play along by writing fake love notes to Doe and by posing as her boyfriend in the company of her family.

Robertshaw's efforts to establish this account were not very successful. In his cross-examination of Doe, Robertshaw asked,

Q. When do you say you first started kissing Jimmy?

A. On the 28th January 1990 – on the night that we met.

Q. Again I suggest that is not correct. There has never been any kissing at all between you and this Jimmy?

A. There has.

...

Q. Again I must suggest to you at no time during the course of knowing this Jimmy have you even had any sexual intercourse with that person?

A. I have.

Q. For whatever reason you are making up these allegations –

A. I am sorry, but I am not –

Q. – against him?

A. – making them up. Do you think I would come this far if I was making it up?

...

Q. You knew full well this person Jimmy was a girl –

A. No, I did not.

Q. – did you not? You would not accept it because you felt to some extent humiliated?

A. I never knew it was a girl.

Q. You felt humiliated because you had given the impression to your parents that you had formed a relationship with another male. That is right, is not it?

A. I felt disgusted when I found out that it was a female.

If we assume that Saunders had indeed been Doe's lover, and that Doe had knowingly consented to sex with her, we can only imagine what Saunders herself must have felt as she witnessed Doe's denigration of their love for each other in open court.

Social work and psychiatry intervene

At the sentencing stage of the trial, we hear yet another account for Saunders' behaviour. Graham Cowen was the Senior Probation Officer of the Norfolk Park Probation Hostel where Saunders either lived or reported on a daily basis after she was arrested again for various unrelated acts, including breaking and entering, burglary, receiving stolen goods, physical assault and car theft. Saunders pleaded guilty to all but one of the charges related to these incidents. Robertshaw performed one last service for his client by asking Judge Crabtree to postpone sentencing to allow for the preparation of a full psychiatric report. Cowen was called to the witness stand at this point. He argued that on the basis of his daily interactions with Saunders for the previous six months, and a conversation he had had with Saunders' mother in the courthouse while the jury was deliberating, he believed that Saunders suffered from a multiple personality disorder. He claimed that when she dressed as a man, she would become quite aggressive. He even hypothesized that she only engaged in criminal behaviour when she was in her masculine personality. As for her other personality, Cowen stated, 'On other occasions she dresses as a woman and she looks and is a very attractive young woman.' In any event, Saunders herself refused to submit to psychiatric evaluation. Judge Crabtree proceeded directly to the delivery of his judgement, in which he handed down a six-year custodial sentence for the two indecent assault charges.

Saunders as a romantic hero

Having studied the trial transcripts, I would say that although they suggest that Brown lied about being indecently assaulted by Saunders, they do not allow us to come to a satisfactory conclusion as to what exactly occurred between Saunders and Doe. The prosecution's account turns on the idea that Doe was relatively naive about sexual matters. Under cross-examination, however, Doe admitted that she had had previous sexual relationships before she met Saunders. Doe stated that she had had sexual relationships with four boyfriends, and had had sexual intercourse with three of them. This evidence suggests that Doe should have been able to assess her interactions with Saunders with an experienced eye. Given this experience, and the prevalence of explicit sexual imagery in British popular culture in the late 1980s, it would be absurd to suggest that Doe was, before she met Saunders, utterly naive with respect to human sexuality. It would be very difficult indeed to find a young woman in contemporary Britain who had not gossiped with friends about sex, seen photographs and film clips containing explicit



Jennifer Saunders (Kippa Matthews, 1991)

sexual imagery, obtained some kind of information about human genitals, human reproduction, birth control and safe sex, or engaged in 'heavy petting', oral sex or intercourse. And yet we can only accept the idea that Saunders accomplished the incredible feat of passing as a man in a sexual relationship if we assume that Doe was in fact utterly naive with respect to human sexuality.

Doe's testimony about her previous sexual experience under cross-examination cast serious doubt on this already unlikely scenario. The prosecution also failed to produce the key piece of evidence in the case, namely the dildo that Saunders supposedly passed off as a penis. Under police questioning, Saunders had flatly denied that she owned 'a vibrator, dildo or other similar implement'. The police officers who searched her flat directly after placing her under arrest on 25 June 1990 made no record of finding a dildo or the lubricant that would have been necessary for its use. Saunders certainly did not have any opportunity to move or to destroy the dildo on that day.

It could be argued that she had moved or destroyed it beforehand, having guessed that Doe would go to the police and that the police would search her flat. Even if we did accept this possibility, we would come up against the following problem: how would a working-class young woman in northern England who, given her age and lack of cosmopolitan experience, had almost certainly never visited a sex toy store in her entire life, come up with a dildo and dildo harness in the first place? And she could have only

passed off her strap-on dildo as a penis on numerous occasions during repeated penetrative sex if her dildo had been a very high quality one – a dildo, in short, that is both rare and expensive. And Saunders herself would have had to have obtained an astonishing and truly admirable degree of dildo mastery before she met Doe – that is, at the age of seventeen. A single moment of clumsiness on one single night over several weeks – and we should recall that Doe alleged that ‘intercourse’ took place virtually every evening – would have given the game away. If Saunders had been an androgynous woman who had engaged in years and years of gender masquerade and had had access to state-of-the-art make-up, voice training, high-quality sex toys, and sexual performance training, and if Doe had been incredibly naive and had always met Saunders while under the influence of alcohol and drugs, then the prosecution’s story might have been somewhat credible. Doe was neither naive nor under the influence of alcohol and drugs when she had sex with Saunders. And Saunders was not that sort of woman. She was a working-class street kid from a broken home who hung out with her friends in a youth shelter in a small northern England town.

Then there is the issue of Saunders’ body. According to the indictment, the relationship between Doe and Saunders lasted one hundred and twenty-two days. Saunders should have had approximately four menstrual cycles during this period. We know in fact that Saunders did menstruate at the time, for the Doe family claimed that their discovery of Saunders’ menstrual items led them to uncover the truth about her gender. Saunders may have been able to conceal her first period when she was just getting to know Doe, but it would have been extremely difficult to do so for the duration of their intimate relationship. Finally, it was revealed during Detective Constable Moon’s summary of his interview with Saunders at the time of her arrest that she claimed that her bra size was 36-D. If this was in fact true, then it would have taken a lot more than Jim light and a baggy T-shirt to conceal her breasts from her sex partner throughout their entire relationship. And no one ever mentioned the possibility that Saunders had used the male impersonators’ technique of binding her breasts.

The account that was given by the defence was, however, even more ludicrous. It is really quite difficult to imagine that a heterosexual woman would pose as a boyfriend over a prolonged period of time in order to protect a woman friend – and a new friend at that – from embarrassment. Given the obviously close-knit character of Doe’s family and their homophobia, it would have been quite clear that anyone who engaged in this sort of deception would have placed her personal safety at risk in doing so. Mere friendship alone is not sufficient reason for Saunders’ decision to pass as a man.

What if we assumed that Saunders’ account that she gave much later to the gay press, namely that the two women fell deeply in love and enjoyed a consensual sexual relationship together, is the correct one? Saunders claimed that she heroically used her gender impersonation to shield their loving relationship from Doe’s homophobic family, and that she loved Mary Doe so much that she did nothing during the trial to save herself, in spite of the fact that Doe viciously betrayed her. Saunders did her best to construct herself as a romantic hero in this interview as she looked back at her experiences after her release.⁸ However, her act of self-sacrifice may not have constituted such a great burden to her at the time. She had already pleaded guilty to other crimes and was already facing a custodial sentence. Perhaps she expected a slap on the wrist for the nonsense involving Doe and Brown and anticipated much worse punishment with respect to the other charges. She could not have known that Judge Crabtree would consider her alleged

sexual crimes to be so much more serious than heterosexual rape that he would sentence her to a six-year custodial sentence. Not knowing what lay before her, it may indeed be true that Saunders took up the role of the romantic hero, and sacrificed herself one last time to set her lover free.

The written notes do not actually contradict this account at all. Sex partners are always inventing play names for each other; it is entirely possible that Doe referred to Saunders lovingly as her 'Jimmy' even though she knew all along that Saunders was a woman. Indeed, if Saunders' butch performance as 'Jimmy' was creating a safe space for their relationship, it is entirely logical to suggest that Doe had affectionate feelings towards this persona. Further, lesbians and gays are always fantasizing in the terms that are provided by heterosexual romance stories. It would be incredibly easy to establish that stable and mature self-identified lesbian and gay couples often promise that they will marry each other one day. For better or worse, such marriage scripts are quite common in lesbian fantasy discourse. The written materials that were presented by the prosecution, then, do not disprove Saunders' later account.

A vigorous defence would also have to deal with the fact that Saunders was actually quite successful in deceiving all of the other members of the Doe family. This is not, however, all that remarkable for two reasons. First, popular expectations of gender conformity are such that it can be extremely easy for any woman who refuses typical feminine dress codes, social gestures and social practices to pass as a man. During the summer of 1985, when passing became a small fad among my lesbian friends, I bought a high-quality moustache, practised a more masculine form of self-presentation and tried to come out in public, only to find that I passed so easily that hardly anyone who did not know me really noticed. But the important point is that I have been called 'sir', referred to as 'he', and asked to leave the women's restroom facilities on countless occasions even when I was not trying to pass as a man at all. 'Male' often operates as a default category; if one does not seem to qualify as female – according to the norms that predominate in a given social formation – then one is read as male.

Second, we must keep in mind that homophobia is an extremely powerful epistemological horizon. Homophobic parents who do not want to acknowledge that their child is homosexual and is actually involved in a homosexual relationship are capable of performing the most extraordinary feats of misperception. I myself have been told by my own parents that they knew my reality so much better than I did that despite my statements to the contrary, the woman whom I introduced to them as my lover was actually just my 'friend'. A friend of mine told me that when she was a teenager and still living at home, her mother walked into her bedroom when she was engaged in a passionate moment with another young woman whose meaning should have been obvious to any third-party observer. She tried to come out to her mother later that day, but, among other things, her mother would not admit that the other woman had even been in the room with her in the first place. Homophobic denial is truly magical; it can make objects and persons disappear and reappear at will. When the Doe family saw their daughter kissing another person, their homophobic framework actually contributed to Saunders' deception: because they assumed that their daughter was heterosexual, they readily accepted Saunders as a male. They saw Saunders as a male because they needed to see her as a male in order to preserve their heterosexist fantasy. Saunders only provided just enough material props – the name, the androgynous dress, the respect for English

working-class heterosexual 'courting' codes, and so on – to allow the Doe family to perpetuate their homophobic denial.

Then there is the question of Mary Doe's desire. Ironically enough, we can construct an argument for the relative attractiveness of lesbian sexuality for Doe on the basis of the statements that she made in court. Reading between the lines of her cross-examination, we get the distinct impression that Doe had not had positive sexual experiences with her male partners. Robertshaw asked,

- Q. How often did you used to have sexual intercourse with your boyfriends?
- A. Once.
- Q. Once with each boyfriend?
- A. Yes.
- ...
- Q. You say that you had intercourse with three of those boyfriends. And how frequently did you have intercourse with them?
- A. Once.
- Q. How long did you have those relationships for?
- A. One day.

We can only imagine what had happened to Doe during her first sexual encounters. She stated that she had begun to have sexual intercourse at the age of fifteen. Her fifteenth birthday occurred eight months before she met Saunders. At some point during those eight months, Doe either had three 'one-night stands' with these men, or had sex with all three of them at the same time. Were these experiences consensual and pleasurable? Did these men treat her with respect, care and love? We will never know for certain, but it is entirely plausible that these encounters were unpleasant.

And then – we could suggest – she met Saunders, a woman who was no angel, a woman who was not above playing practical jokes or engaging in petty crime, but a woman who offered Doe the first meaningful romantic love that she had ever experienced, and a woman brave enough to risk passing as a man to make a safe space for their love. All of this took place in AIDS-panicked Britain; and not in London, Amsterdam, San Francisco or New York, but in a small town near Sheffield. Lacking support from a lesbian and gay community, the lovers tried to make it work, but then they were discovered. At that point, the close-knit Doe family closed ranks, pressured Mary to say that she had been deceived, and began to generate carefully co-ordinated statements to the police. They supported their claim that Mary Doe had been tricked by providing extensive evidence that Saunders had in fact fooled the other Doe family members. Since no one ever challenged them on the depth of their homophobic hatred – not one word was spoken about homophobia throughout the three-day trial – they did not have to admit that it was their own abjection of homosexuality that produced Saunders' deception in the first place. On the contrary, the Doe family represented themselves as the innocent and neutral observers of Saunders' gender performance and constructed their deception as the product of Saunders' sinister plot.

Unchallenged erasures

In my previous analyses of this case, I argued that the jury's decision and the judge's sentence are in fact coherent when they are read in terms of the erasure of lesbianism in official British discourse. Very little credibility is given to any lesbian subject in British official discourse; lesbianism is generally treated as an impossibility, and where lesbianism is recognized, it is depicted as an abject perversion. When Saunders came before the Doncaster Crown Court on 18 September 1991, she was positioned as a homeless juvenile delinquent. It hardly needs to be said that these details did not contribute anything to her credibility.

The prosecution had little difficulty in demonstrating that some kind of 'wrong' had been committed. At issue were not simply the sex acts themselves, and Doe's own experience of pain, but the fact that Doe's relatives had welcomed Saunders into their family because they believed that she was a man. The key point is that Doe's relatives had made very public signs of approval for this relationship, thinking that it was a heterosexual one. The social humiliation of the entire Doe family in the homophobic context of their local community was the real wrong that the courts were asked to address.

All of these factors would have made it extremely difficult for Saunders if she had in fact told her story about her consensual lesbian relationship with Doe. With access to the trial transcripts, however, I would now have to admit that we will never know whether or not that story would have been believed in court, because the defence did not make even the slightest attempt to tell it in the first place, choosing instead to develop another narrative, namely a completely non-sexual account of the friendship between Doe and Saunders. This alternative narrative, however, was contradicted by the strong evidence of the two women's sexual desire and love for each other.

It is also entirely possible that the jury decided to convict Saunders on the charge of indecently assaulting Doe because they had already become convinced that Saunders was guilty of indecently assaulting Brown. They may have taken this view solely on the basis of specific pieces of forensic evidence. It should be noted that there were problems with the forensic evidence that were so serious that they could have been easily spotted by a lay person. But Saunders' lawyer, Mr M. Robertshaw, did not raise a single challenge against that evidence.

In her critique of feminist standpoint epistemology, Alarcón remarks that in a sexist, racist and capitalist social formation, one becomes a 'woman' not only in opposition to men, but in opposition to other women who are positioned differently with respect to asymmetrical power relations.⁹ To this formulation, we need to add that gendered identities can also be built up over time through repeated acts of homophobic abjection. In this case, Doe's 'normal' femininity was rescued – not just for her own symbolic profit, but also for the restoration of her parents' 'normalcy' according to their community's norms – insofar as she was successfully re-heterosexualized through the demonization of Saunders' butch performance as sinister male masquerade. Further, Judge Crabtree reasoned that Saunders had to endure a 'long custodial sentence' because in our current 'days of sexual openness about lesbianism and bisexual behaviour', other male impersonators need to realize that they will face harsh legal punishments if they attempt to 'copy' Saunders' deception. *Regina v. Saunders* therefore gives us a sense of the extent to which gender performances take place not on a terrain that is determined by individual will, but within what Butler calls a 'highly rigid regulatory frame'.

Public Discourse and the Closeting of Butch Lesbians

SHANE PHELAN

In the last ten years, lesbian and gay movements in the United States have increasingly converged on the demand for equal political and social rights. At the same time, the growing public support for gays and lesbians has fostered a new atmosphere for discussion of homosexuality. Several recent mass-market books have addressed gay and lesbian rights. These books and the arguments they address increasingly focus on equality and citizenship rather than privacy rights.¹ This new visibility is not simply a sign of progress, however. The movement out of privacy into visibility has been accompanied by several manoeuvres that work to limit the transformative power of queer politics, in part through the generation of new closets and shadows.

In this essay I will examine the ways in which butch lesbians have been hidden in the new public discourse and politics. For the purposes of this essay, 'butch' refers to a twentieth-century self-presentation of lesbian 'masculinity'. Thus, I include both self-identified butches and those 'masculine' women who may not identify as butch.² I do not include women who occasionally wear men's clothes or who wear their hair short, but who do not consistently threaten heterosexist gender assumptions. Nor do I want to claim that butches are 'born that way', that what distinguishes a butch is the lack of parody or the immutability or the authenticity of her butchness. Butches are made, not born, by the same confluence of social processes that produces other social positions and consciousnesses. I do want to claim, however, that butchness is not simply adopted voluntarily. Butchness is imbricated in the same performative fabric within which late moderns of every stripe negotiate their lives; it is neither the expression of a true essence, nor a voluntary 'performance', nor a compulsory production. It is a mode of being in modern Western societies that is consistently contentious. Recent gay rights activism and discourse intervenes in that contention by its determination not to present butch lesbian images to the heterosexual public. In this, it sharply limits the possibilities and demands of queer peoples.

The new closeting of butches has not been overtly argued and justified (or thoroughly contested) by any public discussion on the issue. Although lesbian communities have and continue to debate butch and femme as positionalities, this debate has not seeped into mainstream gay and lesbian politics. Rather, the new closeting has followed from the adoption of mainstream political, media, and corporate tactics and goals. When challenging exclusion, lesbians and gays have largely erased the fact of their bodies and their desires. Rather than confront the dominant desire and its concomitant fears, 'public' lesbians have downplayed the existence of alternative, potentially more challenging, aesthetics. This strategy is a mistake. The shift to 'identity' talk, to disembodied lesbianism as a status bereft of cultural significance, is an effort to be accepted by

mainstream 'America'. The price of success is the abandonment of the most visible and vulnerable lesbians.

Although the rhetoric of contemporary social movements has thoroughly incorporated the metaphors of visibility, erasure, and closeting as central to questions of oppression and freedom, a critique of strategies of closeting must question its own terms. The closet never fully conceals; rather, it acts as a screen through which certain elements are partially visible, simultaneously serving as the surface for projections. This dual screening is what Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman label 'cultural imperialism': through the imperialist gaze 'others' are visible as stereotypes, while their concrete and particular lives are invisible.³ Thus, the closet as screen does not simply hide or conceal 'reality'; rather, it is the space within which and upon which hegemonic understandings are projected. From this understanding, we can refigure visibility and erasure not as questions of faithful presentations or covering up of authentic lives, but as opportunities for more varied descriptions of lesbian lives. Far from being a seamless unity, lesbian existence opens up a multitude of paths and decisions. 'Erasure' removes the variety of lesbians from public view, thus colluding in homophobic anxieties by maintaining dominant stereotypes.

Responses to erasure have long been contested within lesbian communities. They reflect the situations that particular communities encounter, and responses structure new situations in turn. This is evident in the history of controversy over butch lesbians. Scholars such as Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis have documented conflicts concerning butches in the 1950s. In the Buffalo, New York, lesbian communities that they studied, Kennedy and Davis found that although butch/femme served as 'both a powerful personal code of behavior and as an organizing principle for community life', there was nonetheless contest over 'roles'.⁴ Kennedy and Davis argue that the primary dividing line between those who muted their butchness or their lesbianism and those who did not was a line drawn by class. Improved economic opportunities after World War II enabled out butches to find blue-collar work at the same time as they opened the possibility of upward mobility for those who were willing and able to be 'discreet'.⁵ Thus two fundamentally different paths opened for lesbians. The first encouraged working-class butches to live without the demands of passing, and enabled femmes to more easily live with butches as they chose. The second path led to a muting of butch/femme, most conspicuously to a call for butches to be less 'obvious'.

Lesbians who wanted acceptance from middle-class individuals and organizations wrestled with just what that acceptance required. In the 1950s the predominant paradigm of homosexuality remained the sexological conception of 'sexual inversion', in which it was understood that the 'true' lesbian desired women because psychically she had not reconciled herself to femininity. Sexual desire was by definition heterosexual; thus homosexual desire was the result of 'mistaken' gender identification. Butches were the recognized lesbians, the 'true inverts', and they were punished severely for their violation of gender norms.⁶

In response to this situation, lesbians who desired mainstream acceptance needed to argue that they were indeed 'real women', like their heterosexual sisters in most ways other than sexual preference. Making a convincing case required muting butch self-presentation. This was not necessarily a regressive position, or one to be easily dismissed. Upwardly mobile lesbians were trying to 'diminish the stigma associated with lesbians, and integrate themselves into mainstream society' and to 'have good jobs while

never giving up their social life as lesbians'.⁷ Kennedy and Davis contrast these women with those who separated themselves entirely from lesbian communities and socialized only with a few friends. The first group participated actively in community life, even if in an oppositional way; they identified as people with a stake in the success or failure of their community.

The command to be discreet arose persistently around political action. When homophile activists picketed the White House and the Civil Service building in 1965 to protest policies that banned employment of homosexuals, 'firm rules' on dress were followed. The guidelines for the action stated that 'dress and appearance will be conservative and conventional'. Women uniformly wore dresses, while men wore business suits, white shirts and ties.⁸ This dress was also recommended for public meetings of organizations whenever heterosexuals might be present. Thus, again, 'discretion' was coded in terms of middle-class norms of dress and comportment; 'conservative and conventional' defines these particular outfits only for certain groups.

Contemporary lesbian and lesbian politics demonstrate how little the politics of representation has changed. Today the periodicals are glossy, with mass middle-class circulation (although still delivered in opaque covers), but the debates they encompass and elide are virtually identical to their mimeographed ancestors.

To illustrate the costs of such a mainstream strategy I will focus on the largest US lesbian and gay political organization, the Washington, DC-based Human Rights Campaign (HRC), since the arrival of Elizabeth Birch as executive director in January 1995. Since its beginnings as the Human Rights Campaign Fund in the 1980s, the HRC has grown to an organization of 175,000 members. Focusing on legislative and electoral politics, the HRC lobbies members of Congress on issues related to gays and lesbians, encourages voting by lesbians and gays, and is working to form grass-roots formations able to mobilize gays and lesbians at the state and local level throughout the United States. Their membership, their agenda, and their strategies are resolutely white, middle-class and assimilationist. Unlike the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, HRC engages in a narrowly focused politics of rights.⁹ Their agenda coalesces with their presentation of a mythic public face of lesbianism, a face that is hard for many lesbians to recognize. As it does to people of colour and working-class and poor queer, this public face isolates and hides butch lesbians. In so doing, it abandons opportunities for examination of the role of gender in homophobia as well as class divisions among lesbians. The HRC's attempts to foster mainstream acceptance have put them in the same binds faced by homophile organizations in the 1950s and 1960s, and they have dramatically failed to expand the options for butch lesbians. Rather, their participation in the fostering of assimilationist images further consolidates the isolation and abandonment of a core constituency of lesbians.

Elizabeth Birch opened her tenure at the HRC with a glossy newsletter featuring her picture in front of the US Capitol. Birch is neatly coifed, with earrings and muted red lipstick. Inside, another picture taken from below shows her with legs and arms crossed, showing a bit of leg below her neat black dress. She reads as perky and competent. Is she lesbian? Without contextual framing, it is not clear. Her words, rather than her image, reveal her as lesbian.

Yet her ability to pass does not make Birch's presentation femme. As Joan Nestle has noted, many femmes are taken for heterosexual by lesbians as well as straights.¹⁰ Yet femmes are dressing for themselves and for other women; they are part of 'an erotic

conversation between two women' rather than an attempt to pass. In contrast to a femme aesthetic, Birch's self-presentation participates in the corporate aesthetic of capitalist societies. In order to be corporate leaders, women must sacrifice hints of sexuality that might make them prey to male co-workers. Nonetheless, they are forced to retain gender. Corporate female gender is a matter of demonstrating that one is not a man while simultaneously minimizing the disastrous impact of this fact on the collective life of the corporation – in effect, disincorporating oneself from one's female body. Because female gender, however, is defined largely through sexuality, corporate women cannot hope to escape (hetero)sexuality entirely. Rather, they offer the most muted signifiers available: lipstick, but not too bright; skirts, but not too sexy; earrings, but no dangles. Such strategies reflect the continuing fear and rejection of 'different' bodies within modern democracies. The corporate body, like the citizen body, remains a white male heterosexual one.

As a fashion statement, corporate femininity is one among many proliferating styles that occupy the contemporary social landscape. We need not worry simply because Birch herself dresses in a manner that inserts her comfortably into the corridors of power. Birch's self-presentation is not Birch's alone. It is the product of the HRC board, who selected her as executive director; or rather, the board chose Birch because she embodies the qualities they desire to convey. It is imperative, therefore, that we inquire to the stakes for the progress of a movement of empowerment in difference when its leaders make themselves indistinguishable from the mass of privileged white heterosexuals. Rather than ask whether Birch is hiding her lesbianism in order to be a successful public actor, we should ask other questions: given that Birch's career is that of the 'professional lesbian', as it were, we might ask *how* she, and those who endorse and finance her, are presenting lesbianism and gayness? We can and should examine what sort of politics Birch and the HRC are engaged in. We cannot infer from Birch's clothes alone that the HRC's goals are assimilationist (though we can take a hint), but we can ask about who they work with and through, and what can be accomplished through those venues. In short, how does the HRC introduce 'lesbianism' into public discourse and politics?

The HRC is very firm in its position that homosexuality is a sexual orientation that is fixed from birth or very early childhood, but that this orientation is publicly relevant only insofar as others oppress us on that basis. That is to say, the HRC deflects questions of sexual behaviour. Their picture of homosexuality is one of a private and innocuous difference. What matters in public is not what we do 'in bed', but our merit as hard-working patriotic citizens and our desire to live a life centred on family, work, and community. This presentation is in accord with the HRC's political goals. The HRC seeks non-discrimination laws in housing, credit, and employment; an end to the *de facto* military ban of queers; and same-sex marriage. It is, in fact, the quintessentially liberal agenda. Rather than suggesting, as Teresa de Lauretis puts it, that contemporary queer sexualities 'may be reconceptualized as social and cultural forms in their own right'¹¹ rather than innocuous difference within a heterosexual world, the HRC presents homosexuality as simply a category to be re-relegated to the private sphere precisely through political action to combat discrimination. In the absence of discrimination, they seem to imply, homosexuals will fit right into capitalist America.

As we enter the public world through the Human Rights Campaign, we are urged to leave our desiring bodies at home. Our differences as lesbian or gay people become

nothing more than a question of whom we go home to. Like the assimilationist Jew, whose only difference is where and when s/he worships, this homosexual's difference offers no apparent challenge to existing social structures. And just as such Jews must constantly check themselves to guard against seeming 'too Jewish', the HRC seems to ward off queerness even as it invokes gay and lesbian identities. In its lobbying activity, as in its literature, the HRC eschews queerness for a focused media-ready campaign. Although some of their national media celebrities may be read as butch, by and large the HRC spokespeople present bland all-American images.¹² These nice (famous, white) people, we might imagine someone (white and middle-class) saying, are surely not perverts!

This presentation is clearly not aimed at all queers. Although it is safe to assume that the primary audience of the HRC report is gay (and, to a lesser extent, lesbian), Birch's self-presentation seems aimed not at these groups but at the always-watching heterosexual population; or rather, it is aimed at those gays and lesbians who identify themselves with their heterosexual neighbours and families, who want to minimize their difference. Those who cherish their difference, who value their forms of desire, sensibility, and expression not for how they resemble heterosexual forms but in their own right, have no place in the HRC universe.

Such exclusion may seem to many to be dictated by the concerns of 'practical politics', but it is a mistake. The 'de-gaying' of HRC collaborates in the deeper homophobia that motivates resistance to equal rights. The homosexuality that is enacted in these legislative arenas is a sexuality only of discourse, a sexuality mentioned but never revealed. Failing to address or acknowledge the extent of anti-gay sentiment that runs throughout the United States, the HRC nonetheless reacts to that sentiment by divesting itself of the traces of (homo)sexual difference. In effect, the HRC's policy is to 'tell', to violate the military's rule, but only through avowals and never through acts. Such 'visible' gay-rights leaders present themselves in a manner calculated to make their difference invisible except as a matter of abstract words.¹³

This effort is not unique to the HRC, or to gay-rights activism. As Josh Gamson 'describes, for civil-rights activists, 'at least the appearance of normality is central to gaining political "room". Rights are gained, according to this logic, by demonstrating similarity (to heterosexual people, to other minority groups) in a non-threatening manner.'¹⁴ I do not want to reject the imperative of finding bases for affiliation and sympathy, nor do I wish to deny the importance of civil rights, but I do want to caution against the belief that such strategies and goals are sufficient for social transformation. Even those who truly desire nothing more than the right to hold down an executive position and buy a luxury condo with their spouse will be ill served by detaching legal struggles from cultural visibility.

In *Justice and the Politics of Difference* Iris Young describes how groups may simultaneously confront what she labels 'conscious acceptance and unconscious aversion'.¹⁵ Following Anthony Giddens, Young distinguishes between discursive consciousness, practical consciousness, and 'a basic security system'.¹⁶ Discursive consciousness is distinguished from practical consciousness in that the former can be verbalized, available to conscious reflection and discussion, while the latter is 'the habitual, routinized background awareness that enables persons to accomplish focused, immediately purposive action'.¹⁷ The basic security system consists of the most

elementary level of security and sense of self. All of these levels respond to and enact conceptions of identity, order, and danger.

Civil rights struggles primarily, and of necessity, concern themselves with the level of discursive consciousness. In discussions with legislators, the media, and the public, gay and lesbian rights activists address arguments that would deny equality to sexual minorities. However, they well know that legislative decisions are not made only at the level of discursive consciousness; unconscious aversion works to block arguments as powerfully as does logic. Many marginalized people have experienced the moment when a 'normal' person voices support, even acts on the principle of equality, yet clearly manifests personal discomfort or revulsion for members of the stigmatized group. Often these two gestures are combined by distinguishing between the 'good' (i.e. respectable) and 'bad' members of the stigmatized group. Pushy Jews, dirty immigrants, and lazy Blacks join the flaming queen and the mannish lesbian in this category.¹⁸ This is part of the reason why leaders have insisted on 'respectable' dress and behaviour and have sought heroes among the most normal of queers. As Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen argued in 1989, an effective movement for equality could not simply thumb its nose at all the conventions of the powerful and hope for success.¹⁹ In so doing, Kirk and Madsen echoed Young's caution that 'assimilation into the dominant culture, acceptance into the rosters of relative privilege, requires that members of formerly excluded groups adopt professional postures and suppress the expressiveness of their bodies'.²⁰ Unlike mainstream gay writers, however, Young identifies the demand for respectability as an injustice in itself. She recognizes the differential burden put upon oppressed groups who must police their own members. Failure to challenge the demand of respectability allows social change to operate only at the more superficial levels of discursive consciousness without transforming the more basic structures of identity that shape our reactions to the world.

Butch lesbians are caught by the strictures of a movement that demands respectability as the price of inclusion and equality. Respectability is not simply a matter of treating oneself and others with respect and integrity. It requires careful attention and obedience to prevailing norms of dress and comportment. Unfortunately for butches, it is precisely their deviation from these norms that marks them as visible lesbians. A movement that demands assimilation as the price of 'equality' fails to fully grasp the oppression of lesbians, an oppression that is rooted in gender norms as much as in proscriptions on sexuality.

The failure of mainstream movement leaders to grasp this point is a result of the privileging of (homo)sexuality as an independent axis of oppression distinct from gender. This isolation has been recurrent throughout male gay movement history. In the 1950s and 1960s, most male homophile activists called on lesbians to work in common against anti-gay prejudice. Often, however, this common work amounted to the women making coffee and taking notes. With the rise of feminism lesbians developed an effective language for resisting male privilege, but the men remained largely unaware of the problem. Since the revival of cross-gender coalition work in the 1980s, issues of gender and power have re-emerged in movement politics. The rise of queer theory and activism developed an analysis of sexuality as a quasi-autonomous vector of power, and the religious right's attacks on homosexuals affirmed this analysis. Recent activism, both mainstream and queer, has been quite effective at mobilizing a broad range of people

who earlier had remained closeted or did not introduce sexuality into their politics. However, this new wave of activism has reintroduced the problem of gender.

Recent theory and activism has offered two seemingly opposite failures in the analysis of gender's role in the politics of sexuality. As Biddy Martin has helpfully argued, much queer theory and activism has constructed itself precisely in opposition to earlier feminist work.²¹ In this construction feminism becomes the stodgy, moralistic parent that queers must rebel against, often replacing hegemonic culture as the primary opponent. This separation of feminist analysis from queer politics has the unintended effect of reducing queer theory's potential for critical intervention into gender as a structure of power. Butch/femme relations and identities have been redeemed in queer theory as resistance to and subversion of heteropatriarchy, but this redemption is undertheorized. Instead, recent evocations of butch/femme suggest that transgression of heteronormative gender roles is necessarily liberating in and of itself. The recognition that gender is performative, most fully elucidated by Judith Butler, occasionally can be distorted into the crypto-liberal belief that gender is performance, therefore volitional and personal. Although Butler has explicitly denied this distortion, 'street-level' queer activism has made gender transgression a political action in and of itself, thus relieving the transgressor both from oppression and from any further political obligations.²² This is an inadequate formulation of Butler's point, however. Butch existence may be performative, but it is not simply performance, a set of clothes to put on in the morning and abandon at night. Nor does butchness constitute in and of itself a political position. Butches hold political views across the spectrum(s) of contemporary life. Feminism, as a critical analysis of gender, is central to the formation of a progressive politics of sexuality. Such a critical analysis must include forthright examination and critique of butchness and butch/femme relations, an examination willing to discover both the production of new identities and resistances and participation in heterosexist patriarchy. Simply recovering butch/femme is not enough. Lesbians cannot afford to hide ourselves behind claims of authenticity or transgression; we must patiently explore our histories and current formations in the light of ideals of looser, non-oppressive genders.

The second failure, which is the centre of my focus in this essay, is a mirror, but not a reversal, of the first. This failure, the mainstream erasure of butch lesbians, rarely relies on explicit argumentation or justification. Such argument, of course, would make visible that which is to be hidden. Instead, mainstream erasure operates through the production of images that recode lesbianism for a mass audience nervous about what equality for homosexuals might mean. This erasure is visible in the best efforts of mainstream media to present sympathetic treatments, such as the 1992 *Newsweek* cover story featuring a photo of a lesbian couple. This photo showed the couple, both white, well-scrubbed, with 'normal' haircuts. One could be read as slightly more butch than the other, but neither violated visual codes of the girl next door. It was of course possible to read the photo through lesbian lenses. These women were not like 'lesbians' consumed in male porn, long-haired Playboy bunnies fondling one another. They were believable as lesbians to lesbians – but just barely. The accompanying article followed their lives and those of other gays and lesbians without hinting that 'one was the man', as earlier treatments might have. It was, in fact, a model of the new gay marketing strategy. It was also profoundly disappointing to many lesbians of my acquaintance, as it seemed to leave us out in the same old sexual Siberia. Where were the lesbians who looked like me, either butch/femme couples or unreconstructed lesbian feminists? Where were the lesbians



Four Asian Butches (Perminder Sekhon, 1997)

who look like dykes? *Newsweek's* liberal desire to demonstrate that we're just like other girls served to bolster support for those lesbians who are just like other girls. The rest of us, it seems, are still out of luck.

The presentation of a respectable lesbian population, because it avoids the subconscious aversion and fear of heterosexuals, can only be of limited effect in fostering equality. Those who argue that we should 'show our best face' demonstrate their

inadequate understanding of the stakes of the battle. First, their standards of a 'good' face are as resolutely middle-class as those of the earlier homophile movement. What face looks best depends upon the cultural norms of a given population. Defining as the 'best face' that which accords with white middle-class heterosexual norms amounts to abandoning any claims for autonomy or alternative aesthetics. Second, such arguments suggest that butchness is an optional presentation, rather as the naïve transgressivists do. This argument implies that lesbians are all 'really' women, so it won't hurt if we dress and act like them at certain moments. Both the transgressivists and the mainstream gay organizations and writers treat butchness as drag, failing to recognize and honour butch experience and identities as valuable modes of life that are neither simply inherent nor merely performance, but complex and stubborn clusters of perception, desire, and subjectivity.

As an example of a contrasting possibility, the National Lesbian and Gay Task Force's choice in 1994 of Melinda Paras as executive director demonstrated what the end of homophobia might really mean. I have no idea whether Paras identifies herself as butch, but her public presentation confronts and challenges stereotypes of lesbians. Her confidence with a butch presentation is perhaps not coincidentally linked to a leftist politics, and her appointment reflects the more grass-roots leftist history of NGLTF. NGLTF has historically had a broader agenda than that of newer organizations such as HRC. It has been less wedded to respectability, as it has been a broader-based community-building organization as well as a legislative force. The fact that Paras is also a woman of colour (as is Urvashi Vaid, her predecessor as executive director) also speaks to NGLTF's broader vision.²³ The visibility of butch women at NGLTF reflects on that broader vision of change as well as the methods for achieving equality.

Strengthening left-oriented organizations is especially important for butch lesbians. In the twentieth century, many butch lesbians found work in skilled and unskilled labour.²⁴ As the United States economy moves toward service provision and labour positions move overseas, self-presentation becomes more central to the lives of Americans. Those who do not 'look right' may find themselves without jobs, or on the bottom tier of income. Organizations that concern themselves with the welfare of lesbians must link formal rights to larger economic questions if they are to make a real difference in the lives of butch lesbians.²⁵

An equality that does not include an end to butch-bashing and stigmatization is a liberal equality, an equality for those who fit the parameters of 'rational persons'. A liberal agenda does nothing to change the attitudes of those of all sexualities who fear and hate gender nonconformity. Activism that insists on respectability and polices its own members in the name of acceptability has already betrayed those it claims to represent. In order to fulfill the goals of queer equality and empowerment, lesbian and gay organizations need to consciously choose to support and be proud of all members of their communities. Rights for the 'good' perverts cannot be bought by distancing themselves from the 'bad' ones. Not only is it a betrayal of those who bear the most extreme brunt of violence and hatred, it is short-sighted because the powerful forces arrayed against equality will continue to rely on fears of gender disorder to threaten any gains that are made. The challenge for lesbian politics is not to sanitize or arrange us; it is to provide spaces in which people may or may not be 'out', may or may not be 'visible', to foster plural worlds and spheres. This must be both our strategy and our goal.

Orifices in Space: Making the Real Possible

SALLY R. MUNT

I am visiting Warwick Castle, a popular tourist attraction in central England. I enter the toilet facility labelled 'Ladies'. On the way in I pass two people who exclaim indignantly 'That's not a woman!' I ignore them and lock myself in a stall. Seconds later there is a loud banging on the door and shouts of 'Open up!' I reclothe myself and open the closet door to meet a confrontation with the attendant, who has apparently been told there is a man in the toilet. First she demands that I leave immediately: I refuse. Doubt enters, she surveys my body and asks aggressively and repeatedly 'Well – are you a man or a woman?' The attendant is an immigrant doing a squalid job, and I don't know whether she's been ordered to do this by the well turned-out white women who complained, or whether her hostility is masking defensiveness. I don't know whether to act aggrieved, or try to appease. Finally, as the many other occasions of toilet harassment queue up in my consciousness, I tell her 'What do you think?', shut the door, and get on with it.

In the late seventeenth century, diarist Samuel Pepys was lucky to have 'a very fine close stool' in his drawing room, and a handy cesspit in the cellar. But caught short near Lincoln's Inn, Mr and Mrs Pepys, like most Londoners of the period, would have had to do their business in the corner of the street, turning their faces to the road, assuming that their arses would not be recognized as readily by fellow pedestrians. As Casanova observed unhappily, this common practice resulted in a generous display to passing travellers, to which his companion Martinelli responded dryly that 'people in the carriages need not look'.¹ Eighteenth-century satirist Jonathan Swift expended much creative force on excremental functions; his description of London's open drainage system is punctiliously expressed:

Now from all parts the swelling kernels flow,
And bear their trophies with them as they go;
Filths of all hues and colours seem to tell
What street they sailed from by their sight or smell . . .²

Swift is most famously cited for the line 'Oh! Celia, Celia, Celia sh—', which occurs in the 1730 poem 'The Lady's Dressing Room' (line 118). Whereas the idea that women don't shit in Enlightenment thought remains a popular one, actually Swift's poem is a satire on this very same idealization of femininity. His *mock* horror satirizes the stupid Strephon, the foolish creep who steals into Celia's bedroom and uncovers more of Celia than he could possibly have hoped:

So *Strephon* lifting up the Lid,
To view what in the Chest was hid.
The Vapours flew out from the Vent,
But *Strephon* cautious never meant
The Bottom of the Pan to grope,
And fowl his Hands in Search of Hope.³

The 'obscenity' the lover sees in his Celia exposes the folly of his notions about women. Swift's attitude to excrement fluctuated ambiguously, for he was simultaneously repulsed and attracted.⁴ However, Swift's poem, from an era of greater excremental liberty, was published nine years before the first mention in history of gendered toilets. At the Great Ball in Paris in 1739, the remarkable innovation of allotting separate cabinets inscribed with 'Garderobes pour les femmes' and 'Garderobes pour les hommes', staffed respectively by chambermaids and valets, situated the moment of segregation as securely aristocratic. British records do not stipulate a particular moment, but the great expansion of public sanitary provision came in the guise of Victorian philanthropy. The historical conjunction of the expansion of leisure and middle-class urban life, moral and medical panics about diseases such as cholera and typhoid, gender polarization and sexual repression, the Industrial Revolution and the commodification of domestic engineering, empirical classification and regulation, the erection of ornate public buildings – all these factors conspired to create those Great British institutions: the Ladies and the Gents.

The public toilet is a breach-zone between public and private, between gender and the body. The uncomfortable feeling which a butch in the Ladies toilet provokes is that open recognition of sexuality, and hence the homophobic cries of 'Is that a man or a woman?' are Althusserian interpellations, and calculated, knowing attempts to deny the sexual presence. This butch in the toilet signifies sexual *knowledge*, both within lesbian culture and in Woman's culture. The butch belies the myth of gender separatism, heterosexual binarism. She instigates female homosexual panic amongst the women, a violent reaction which betrays the disturbing belief that sexuality is the solvent of stable identities.⁵ Leo Bersani has identified one rationale for homophobia as a reaction against the fear of recruitment; homophobia produces the 'fearful excitement at the prospect of becoming what one already is'.⁶ Although the butch can signal the 'gay presence', she also metonymically signifies the 'gay absence', in the sense that the butch nudges the straight's paranoia that we are indeed everywhere, and often deceptively disguised as the same. Take this passage from Bersani:



[Judith] Butler emphasises the dangers for the social system of 'permeable bodily boundaries'. Homosexual sex – especially sex between men – is a threatening 'boundary-trespass', a site of danger and pollution for the social system represented synecdochally by the body.⁷

Any activity or condition that exposes the permeability of bodily boundaries will simultaneously expose the factitious nature of sexual differences as they are postulated within the heterosexual matrix.⁸

In a complex fermentation of associations – bodily discharge/inside-out, anus/shit/homosexual, butch masculinity/'female' body, nakedness/sex – a number of boundaries tremble. Toilets are liminal spaces; the butch is a liminal identity. The butch in the toilet is like a science fictional trope, when the 'real' breaks down and becomes the 'possible'.

In the USA, I discovered that toilets are called bathrooms, even when there are no washing facilities in evidence. I was amused to find that in sites of particular transience, such as the highway or the beach, the toilet was euphemized more quixotically as the 'comfort station' (although this comes close to the OED 1662 definition of 'water-closet' as 'closet of ease'). This nice-nellyism smacks of sexual services, an irony not lost on a European. In Britain the public bathroom is more prosaically English; the public toilet is more specifically gendered and class-specific. The intention is that females attend the 'Ladies', and males the 'Gents' – if you can get the word out, that is. I began to notice how often a verbal request to use the [any word for toilet] is cut off by a gesture, and a curt or ingratiating phrase 'Over there/Down there/Through the passageway' et cetera, or even merely a glance in the vague direction, precipitated by a barely raised eyebrow. (Why this game in restaurants – how minimalist can you get?)

We have come a long way since the seventeenth century when toilets were celebrated, and monarchs would hold court on the seat of power. In the 1970s and 1980s, as a result of feminism, many progressive institutions relabelled their lavatories in simple Helvetica type: 'Women' and 'Men'. However, the accompanying insignia on lav doors remained curiously the same, distinguishing semiotically between 'men' (who had legs), and women (who had a triangular torso and short legs germinating below the knee). The surprise is that people do *not* divide into the literal referents of these proprietary marks of gender difference, i.e. those wearing trousers go into one amenity, those wearing dresses into the other. The disjunction between the sign and its meaning is one of the paradoxes that Canadian photographer Cyndra Macdowell satirizes in her graphic 'A Hit & Run Lesbian Presence Project' (1994).

For me, the public toilet is the discomfort station. Recently, after enduring years of harassment when trying to avail myself of facilities offered in 'the Ladies' I have started to use the third alternative: the disabled toilet. In Britain the disabled toilet, like the third sex, is placed between the Ladies and the Gents. It is generally more roomy, you can turn around in it, and carry in with you all the baggage you desire. Used by variously sexed individuals, the disabled toilet, with its generous full-length mirror, offers a space for reflection. In there I can strip off my gender dysphoric regalia, lengthily scrutinize every extra roll of fat in the fluorescent light (there is never a queue), and yield to a vulnerability I wouldn't contemplate in the Ladies next door. For me, it is a stress-free location, a queer space in which I can momentarily procure an interval from the gendered public environment, and psychically replenish. Conversely, the disabled toilet is also a room set aside for the disjunctive, ungendered, and strange. The disabled toilet provides isolated

privacy and secrecy for the marked body. In the intimacy of bathroom culture, the bodily differentiated are required to use this separated sphere. Entering and leaving the door branded 'disabled', I anxiously scan the floor, rather than acknowledge I have been seen. Using this toilet is inflected by shame. I am treading on another borderline, not 'worthily' disabled, but certainly afflicted. It is at once a perfect, and an anachronistic designation, the same positioning simultaneously dis- and en-abling.

Motorway service stations are by butch consensus the worst places for homophobic abuse. They are so notorious precisely because they are anxious places of transition, hence known boundaries must be even more vigorously enforced, and unsettling eruptions of desire denied. See Lacan's discussion of the image of the twin (toilet) doors symbolizing, 'through the solitary confinement offered Western Man for the satisfaction of his natural needs away from home, . . . by which his public life is subjected to the laws of urinary segregation',⁹ for the power, and the arbitrariness of this signification. Lacan follows this observation with the joke of the little boy and the little girl who sit facing each other on opposite sides of a train carriage. As the train pulls into the station the boy asserts 'Look! We're at Ladies!', to which the girl responds 'Idiot! . . . can't you see we're at Gentlemen!'¹⁰ Henceforth, says Lacan, Ladies and Gentlemen will be two countries, unable to form a truce since they are, in fact, the same country. I will return to this point later with Freud, but for the moment we observe that Lacan's train occupies an instant of transition, and he captures this antipathetic anxiety perfectly:

It remains to be seen what steps, what corridor, the S of the signifier, visible here in the plurals in which it focuses its welcome beyond the window, must take in order to rest its elbows on the ventilators through which, like warm and cold air, indignation and scorn come hissing out below.¹¹

Lacan is addressing not just the arbitrariness of the signifier, but also the aggression by which the laws of the closed order of signification ('the meaning insists') are policed. But we know from Lacan that the signifier 'slides', it is insecure, it requires reinforcement precisely because of its instability. Catherine Clément comments briefly on this passage in her *The Lives and Legends of Jacques Lacan* (1983), noting that:

Like the ethnologist, the psychoanalyst knows that there is no difference between the noble and the ignoble, read Lévi-Strauss's *Mythologies* and you will learn how the world is created out of a grandmother's urine and the suffocating farts with which she poisons the demiurgic hero. And when the historians set to work on the 'historical psychology' of ancient Greece in the hope of stripping away the grandiose and modest cloak the nineteenth century had thrown over her body, they discovered parings, waste, dribbled milk, and noxious odors. To be cultivated is to become aware of the obverse of culture . . .¹²

So, Clément insinuates how social formations – or rather, pretensions – are ruptured by the universalizing properties of bodily waste. In British motorway toilets, the working-class body excretes with the middle-class body; the gender demarcation *has* to be so severely regulated precisely since 'other' signifiers are so dangerously overridden. Presumably, the obverse of culture is 'nature', with all of its inferred associations and projections, and underneath those, the paranoid fear of degeneration, and recidivism.

To pursue my investigation of toilets, I came across an historical instance which can be interpreted as a discursive forerunner to motorway service station anxiety, and hence, a partial explanation for its peculiarly heightened surveillance of gender and sexual boundaries. Edwin Chadwick was a nineteenth-century Poor Law Commissioner and philanthropist who produced the *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* in 1842. He was an upper-class agitator who surveyed the poor of Britain and argued for centralized government regulation. One of his abominations were the common lodging-houses, buildings of multiple and transient occupancy:

if the police of the common lodging-houses be neglected, it will be liable to the continued importation, if not the generation, of epidemic disease by the vagrant population who frequent them . . . These houses are the stages for the various orders of tramps and mendicants who travers [sic] the country from one end to the other, and spread physical pestilence, as well as moral deprivation.¹³

Some of these houses are occupied exclusively by foreigners . . . they are the resort of tramps, begging impostors, thieves and prostitutes of the lowest description . . . the crowded state of the beds, filled promiscuously with men, women, and children . . . mark the depraved and blunted state of their feelings, and the moral and social disorder which exists.¹⁴

I have known 40 persons lying half clothed, lodged in one of those wretched dwellings, three or four lying in one bed upon straw, and only a single counterpane to cover them, which is never changed. Excrementitious matter was allowed to accumulate and be about the rooms in all directions, the stench being most revolting.¹⁵

Encapsulating the terror of transitory spaces, Chadwick's diatribes are clearly concerned with *moral* as well as physical hygiene. Chadwick argues vociferously for direct inspection by the police, but also for a licensing system, so that landlords take on regulatory practices themselves. The sheer intensity of the Commissioner's gaze communicates to the reader how out of control he perceives common lodging-houses to be. They are the Victorian precursor of the motorway service station except in one important respect: in the contemporary concourse there is a confluence of class positions. Although transport drivers are often siphoned off around the back, generally the areas are heterogeneous. Even the very poor will bring their own sandwiches, but still use the toilets. The toilets are the first stage of organizing the traveller; they are invariably the first territory to be entered in this unusually desegregated world. And the primary prior differentiation for use of these facilities is – are you a man, or a woman?

Focusing on the genealogy of the toilet, the universalized British term 'water-closet' retains within it the signifier of the epistemological trope of homosexuality. The closet is *the* signatory metaphor of modern gay identity.¹⁶ One might speculate that the exposure of homosexual identities is linked, albeit perhaps unconsciously, to a sign that stands for doing something in public that is historically and etymologically consigned to privacy. Going into the Ladies produces an inverse dynamic: she leaves the anonymity of the public space – which in this scenario functions as the closet – in order to bodily claim female essentialism, in the Ladies. The restroom hopes to provide relief from the labour of concealment. But the butch in the toilet is ill at ease with the movement of entering

the 'Ladies' space as she is so often already 'outed' as not-Woman. Her anxiety can be cruelly exploited. In the toilet she locks the door, and is 'inned'. On re-emerging into the semi-public space she is shamed by rebuke and revulsion, producing a tormenting confirmation of her outlaw status. Conversely, on leaving altogether, she can sometimes return to the safety of passing on the street. Non-butch women often use the facilities in the 'rest-room' to touch up the make-up that produces them as women, to reconceal, and to invigilate their, and each other's ability to pass as 'real' women. M2Fs in transition also do this. The function of the mirror on the wall is presumably to afford the moment of 'checking' that one's gender identity is intact. The moment in the mirror also reveals, repetitively and performatively, the instability of the gesture. Why is there *always* a mirror in public toilets, and why do *butches* look in it? I suspect, like the ur-moment in lesbian coming-out movies when the protagonist tests her lesbian identity for the first time in a mirror, it is a counter-narrative, a transitional scene of fantasy-formation. The mechanisms of concealment, deception, and unveiling are even more compounded for the femme in the toilet, who can pass as a straight woman, or be hailed as a butch lesbian, when her femme-ininity is read as homosexuality. To further queer the picture, one might speculate on the vagaries of reaction which transpire when butches and/or femmes visit the toilet together.

The public toilet is a place of exposure as much as concealment, predeterminedly eroticized with Western codes of sexual excitement. A Freudian would see the shame co-existent with physical excreta metonymically writing itself over the entire body – witness the ritualistic shame behaviours evident in any visit to 'the Ladies' (avoidance of direct eye or physical contact, assiduous hand washing). Notice also the titillation which brushes it. Toilets produce moisture, and warmth. Toilets are, crucially, environments of *contagion*. Homosexuality, similarly, is haunted by the discourse of contagion. This discursive conjunction is too much to resist: D. A. Miller has written about how the dominant signifying practice of homophobia is connotation; the homosexuality produced by connotation, however, is insubstantial, and thus perceived as ubiquitous. Connotation instigates a project of confirmation, hence the threat must be contained by denotation ('Are you a man, or a woman?'), as Miller puts it: 'Whenever homosexuality is reduced to epistemology, to a problem of *being able to tell*, this will to see never fails to make itself felt.'¹⁷ By appellation, and by semiotic regulation, the threat is imaginatively restrained, the challenger immunized from contagion. In Ladies toilets no men are present; the heterosexuality being invoked is without half of its organizing principle – in a sense it is temporarily phantasmatic. More accurately, perhaps, it *exposes* heterosexuality as a phantasm, as an imaginary state, and renders it visible as an identity-in-negation, formed against the desire for women, rather than for desire for men.

Miller explains how the male subject is formed between the homosexual and the woman. If we logically extend this to explain homophobia in the Ladies, we must explain the female subject as formed between the lesbian and the man. There is clearly a gender binarism operating here: male v. femininity, female v. masculinity. Homosexuals of both sexes are read as gender dysphoric. From my own experience of homophobia in toilets I am painfully aware that being challenged about one's sex is not usually the issue; my *body* is read 'correctly' as female, but my *gender* causes the problem, hence the question 'Are you a man or a woman?' is a displacement of the unutterable 'Are you a lesbian?' This question would inevitably elicit a positive, and make the spectre of homosexuality real; it cannot be said, though, not just because its perverse dynamic¹⁸ provokes the

realization that I am too much like you, and not different enough (*vis-à-vis* the psychoanalytic account of homophobia as fear of sameness), but also because the organizing principle of the space – sexual difference premised on heterosexuality – insists on no ambiguity. Without gender there is no heterosexuality. The butch in the toilet, then, reinserts the pervasive ambiguity which is the failure of denotation, due to the irretrievably sliding signifier. The erotic enjambment of hetero/homosexuality is betrayed precisely by the homophobic stare – she really has to look at me, she has to *gaze* at me to get that I am a lesbian, and as Miller observes ‘the object of voyeuristic desire is precisely what must not catch the eye’.¹⁹

Toilets have not received the same kind of fetishized attention in lesbian culture that they have had in gay men’s, where they are also euphemized as ‘cottages’ or ‘tea-rooms’. The eroticism of sodomy and the concomitant scatological fantasies of gay male literature are not generally mirrored in lesbian porn, except in occasional S/M leather writing. But Joan Nestle’s ‘The Bathroom Line’ plays on the more specifically lesbian ambivalence towards toilets in bars, in a short piece defining the parameters of the lesbian underworld during the 1950s:

But the most searing reminder of our colonised world was the bathroom line. Now I know it stands for all the pain and glory of my time, and I carry that line and the women who endured it deep within me. Because we were labelled deviants, our bathroom habits had to be watched. Only one woman at a time was allowed into the toilet because we could not be trusted. Thus the toilet line was born, a twisting horizon of Lesbian women waiting for permission to urinate, to shit.

The line flowed past the far wall, past the bar, the front room tables, and reached into the back room. Guarding the entrance to the toilet was a short square, handsome butch woman, the same every night, whose job it was to twist around her hand our allotted amount of toilet paper. She was [to] us, a man’s obscenity, doing the man’s tricks so we could breathe. The line awaited all of us every night, and we developed a line act. We joked, we cruised, we commented on the length of time one of us took, we made special pleas to allow hot and heavy lovers in together, knowing full well that our lady would not permit it. I stood, a femme, loving the women on either side of me, loving my comrades for their style, the power of their stance, the hair hitting the collar, the thrown-out hip, the hand encircling the beer can. Our eyes played the line, subtle touches, gentle shyness weaved under the blaring jokes, the music, the surveillance. We lived on that line: restricted and judged, we took deep breaths and played.

But buried deep in our endurance was our fury. That line was practice and theory seared into one. We wove our freedoms, our culture, around the obstacles of hatred, but we also paid our price. Every time I took the fistful of toilet paper, I swore eventual liberation. It would be, however, liberation with a memory.²⁰

For the femme, the co-existence of masculinity with the female body in the butch incarnates a particular lesbian eroticism. This narrative of the contradictions of the toilet space manages to display the heroics of the abjected (both butch and femme): the trick

is to play on, despite the derision. The spatial metaphor of the bathroom line carousing through the bar adeptly illustrates the discursive limits of both parties. The frisson occurs in the juxtaposition between shame and pleasure; pushing the edges of the forbidden produces a highly erotic anger. For myself, I have never found toilets exciting – my trespass disables the autonomy of desire. My unscientific impression is that femmes find toilets more carnal than butches, as their liminality is perhaps more easily transposed into eroticism.

Toilets, in Western culture, have long been places of punishment. I even came across a research paper on this enticingly entitled 'The Nun in the Toilet: Urban Legends and Educational Research',²¹ relating to the lavatorial fears of adolescent boys. Playground threats on your birthday included having your head flushed down the toilet as your trousers are pulled down. The association of toilets with discipline and chastisement is widespread and ritualistic. The two novels *Stone Butch Blues* and *Bastard Out of Carolina* both contain scenes of sexual torture in toilets.²² Mary Gaitskill's novel *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* describes a short scene of sexual torture between two schoolgirls which takes place in the basement bathroom. The girls re-enact a scene from a porn magazine, to which Justine catches Rose guiltily returning:

For although Justine had only meant to cop a feel, within a few delirious moments Rose was placed on the closed lid of the toilet, her pants and panties in a wad on the floor . . .

Justine stood and surveyed her victim with astonishment and contempt. She was shocked at the sight of the hairless genitals; they reminded her of a fallen baby bird, blind and naked, shivering on the sidewalk. It disgusted her to think she had something like that too, and she focused the fullness of her disgust on Rose. There were no more cajoling words, the mouse had been hypnotised, she was free to strike at leisure.

Fascinated by the meek unprotected slit but too appalled to touch it, she plucked a yellowing toothbrush from its perch above the sink – pausing to glance at herself in the mirror as she did so – and stuck the narrow handle in her playmate's vagina. From the forgotten region of Rose's head came a truly pathetic sound; her face turned sideways and crumpled like an insect under a murdering wad of tissue, and tears ran from under her closed eyelids.

But it was not tears that brought Justine to her senses, it was the stiff, horrified contraction of the violated genitals even through the ridiculous agent of the toothbrush, a resistance more adamant than any expressed so far. Suddenly she realised what she was doing and could not bear to be in her own skin.

. . . This incident did not interfere with Justine's other make-out activities, except in one way: after a squatting self-examination over a mirror, she vowed that while they could touch it all they wanted, she'd never allow anyone to look at that ugly thing between her legs.²³

'Lacan's cough' in this piece is Justine's quick glance into the mirror before she rapes Rose. The mirror in the toilet gives Justine the permission to penetrate, and yet when

she returns to it, to her own body, she is blighted with revulsion. The episode is replete with ambivalence, with the co-implication of disgust and desire. Note that the subjectivity of Rose, through the metaphor of the bird, conspires with its own corruption – the toothbrush is taken from its 'perch' to penetrate her. Justine pauses in the mirror as she takes it, for her agency is permeated by Rose's subjectivity. The mirror is the cipher of desire, but also of *misrecognition*, as the scene turns sour.

Shame and humiliation are intrinsically connected to excretory functions, and coupled with what we know from Freud concerning anal eroticism; toilets begin to become rather overdetermined spaces. Anality and homosexuality are co-implicated in public discourse, so much so that, as Lynda Hart²⁴ has demonstrated, the performance art of a *heterosexual* woman, Karen Finley, can evoke homophobia. By smearing chocolate (i.e. shit) over her own body in a satire of auto-eroticism, or inserting yams into her anus, her presumably female heterosexual eroticism can only be read by a straight audience as *homosexual*, due to the exclusionary practice of this discourse:

Finley's performances became fixated in the public imagination with bodily orifices and the boundary between what is inside and outside the body. And it is important to notice that not just any bodily orifice, but her anus, the opening into the body that has historically been most associated with 'unnatural' sexuality, was at issue . . . [this act was read] as not only dirty and disgusting but also and most importantly as *gender transgressive*.²⁵

'course, only gay men do arses.

But what about the commonly occurring misrecognition of butches as gay men? And within lesbian cultures, what about the association of butch/femme with sadomasochism within the organizing binary top/bottom: doesn't this connect butch masculinity with 'perversions' such as coprophilia, and, according to cultural feminists, the defilement of their woman-ness? May not these associations make the abjection of the butch more transparent?

Freud's essay 'The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life', written in 1912, starts by discussing the incest taboo as an explanation for the symptom of male impotence. The theme of Freud's argument is that male (hetero)sexuality depends upon his splitting off of feelings of tenderness and respect from his sexual object, in order to gain libidinal satisfaction. Discussing this further he adds:

In my opinion the necessary condition of forbiddenness in the erotic life of women holds the same place as the man's need to lower his sexual object . . . Some obstacle is necessary to swell the tide of the libido to its height.²⁶

He discusses the substitutions necessary for sexual satisfaction, and the prohibitions that circulate in culture to sublimate diverse sexual desires. He discusses a number of displacements, taboos, and punishments:

Excremental things are all too intimately and inseparably bound up with sexual things; the position of the genital organs – *inter urinas et faeces* – remains the decisive and unchangeable factor. One might say, modifying a well-known saying of the great Napoleon's, 'Anatomy is destiny'. The genitals themselves have not undergone the development of the rest of the

human form in the direction of beauty; they have retained their animal cast; and so even today love, too, is in essence as animal as it ever was.²⁷

What is crucial to note here is that, according to anti-psychoanalytical feminists, the anathemic moment in Freudian discourse – 'Anatomy is destiny' – actually occurs in the discussion of excremental processes. The anus is being offered as the undoing of sexual/genital difference; the anus is actually the marker of sexual *indifference*. Thus, if we consider this Freudian formulation further in relation to the cultural symbolism of the anus, not only does it constitute one of the forbidden and displaced objects necessary to full libidinal satisfaction (both for men *and* women), it also dangerously collapses the edifice of gender differentiation intrinsic to heterosexuality. Therefore, the butch in the toilet elicits the homophobic response precisely because she signifies anatomical sameness and a highly threatening but necessary catalyst to heterosexual desire, in an uneasy moment of physical transition and metamorphosis. Her anus functions as the episteme of homosexuality in the water closet. She outs the anal eroticism of heterosexuality, and in doing so, she transfixes the homophobic gaze.

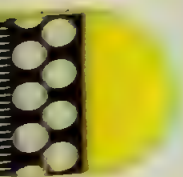


The Conversation: Self-portrait 1997

ELISSA PERRY









Living under the Sign of the Cross: Some Speculations on Femme Femininity

LYNDA HART

The correct distance is the opposite of the feminine. A bizarre minuet.
Lacan searched for the correct distance, but for himself he preferred madness,
the result of incorrect distance.
— Catherine Clément

I have been accused of telling stories. I confess, it is true. I learned how to tell them on sultry southern days sitting in the dirt outback watching Mama with her legs spread wide to make a basket with her house dress. Shucking corn. Shelling peas. Her rhythm was steady and silent. Mesmerized by her sure hands, I fixed on her strong forearms as they whisked the husks off in one swift swoop and the sweet white corn rose naked from its sheath. She popped the peas out of their husks by rolling her thumb under them, sending them zinging against the metal bowl like boys shooting marbles. Sitting with my legs bent under me, rocking on my haunches, I tried to shuck and shell as fast as she could. Mama taught me to keep my knees together, my legs crossed twice, once at the calves, another at the ankles. Knee-high to her thighs, open and swaying to make a breeze, pelvis wide and relaxed, I could see her, smell her – when the wind whipped up a hot blast I could almost taste her. Mama sat open like a butch on a barstool. I wanted to drink her down.

All the other men wore their hair buzzed 1950s marine-style. Daddy kept one long lock of his raven-black hair in a loose wave that fell prettily across his forehead. When it fell across his eyes as the southern heat drew it down, he would wind it back with a gentle turn of his hand. He wore the coloured shirts, baggy trousers, and bright ties that Mama picked out for him. She always got him what she liked. The story she told was that Daddy was 'colour-blind', so never mind that no other men wore pink and yellow shirts; Daddy couldn't see what he was wearing so no one could hold him responsible, and Mama loved to look at him dressed in the clothes she fondled in the shops but could not wear.

Marybell was Mama's only friend, who wasn't 'blood'. She drove up in her pickup truck about once a month, always unannounced. She wore her salt-and-pepper hair in a crewcut, and kept a pack of Marlboros rolled up in the sleeve of her flannel shirts. She would swing out of the truck's cab and bounce down to the ground with a fifth of Jim Beam in her hand, grinning broadly. Mama would jump off the front porch and fling herself into Marybell's arms. Marybell lifted her off the ground and swung her around crying 'girl, girl, girl'. No one else ever called Mama 'girl'.

Great Aunt Ada played the trombone in the US Army's marching band. She lived with Clarice for thirty years, a woman every one whispered about: 'She wears boxer shorts,

she shaves, she must be a man.' Ada and Mama and Marybell were all 'butch', except when they were 'outbutched' by each other and women like Clarice. My younger sister was the only girl who wore Levi jeans to the first grade. The teacher sent her home the first day and Mama marched right back with her and insisted that 'her daughter was not like the other girls'. And that was that. All the girls were butches I suppose, although that word was not in our vocabulary. I just thought they were women. There was very little femininity around, so Daddy and I made up for it. I played it to the hilt, and revelled in the luxury of having it all to myself, except for the little that I spared Daddy, who always came in second best. Mama always said we were two of a kind, like father, like daughter.

By the time I was fourteen, I had a boyfriend. The toughest guy on the block. A 'hood' we called him. He had tattoos on his forearms and was always getting into fights, which he invariably won. Everyone was scared to death of him. He drove too fast, drank too much, and talked too little. I nursed his bruises, and gave him more. By the time I was sixteen we had transformed my Sears princess-suite bedroom into a veritable dungeon. We spent our afternoons after school shopping in hardware stores. Intoxicated by their smells, fondling items that we would purchase, imagining how we could improvise with them later that night. No one ever said a word about the bolts in the wall over my white headboard, or the collection of ropes and chains sometimes left carelessly dangling from their posts. I kept one package of unused birth control pills in the top of my nightstand drawer. The rest of the drawer was full of drugstore and hardware items. We didn't try to hide them. As long as I wasn't pregnant I was 'pure as the driven snow' according to Ann Landers. Besides, he never really touched me much. I was a stone femme top, but of course I had no idea that I was. I just liked the way these things felt, smelled, and worked.

The night before my best girlfriend got married at age seventeen, I spent the night with her. It was a night like many others, except she had a wedding gown hanging on the bedroom door. We danced to some old Beatle records until we both fell down on her bed exhausted. I dressed her in her wedding gown, then we did what we had done many times before, but this time I was a little rougher with her, more forceful, aggressive, 'preparing' her for her husband. I was the only bridesmaid who couldn't wear my white gloves with my yellow gown the next day. I cried so hard through the ceremony that no one could hear the preacher.

On the day that Gilles Deleuze died, I had spent most of it standing on the terrace of my apartment on the seventeenth floor. I put one leg over the railing and leaned over. Then I sat on the railing and rocked a bit. Once I almost slipped, but involuntarily caught myself. The will to live is strong. It's hard to go over. I thought maybe if I stayed out there long enough it would just happen. I'd slip. I was incredibly adept at arranging accidents. I got annoyed with myself after awhile for being unable to follow through, so I went back in and got on the Internet. There was the message: 'Deleuze Is Dead'. He jumped! Out the window of his apartment. Then I really felt awful, not only was I a failure and a coward, but once again I was reminded of what a 'woman' I was. Now I was feeling ashamed on top of it all. Plus I had not accomplished one single thing all day.

I gave up and tuned into *Oprah*. The audience was mostly women, as usual, and the show this day was: 'What to do if your child is being electrocuted in your own home and you are alone'. There was a panel of experts, mostly firemen, with one lady counselor to pick up the emotional pieces that were bound to fly. So here's the scenario: you're home alone and your baby has picked up a hairpin and crawled over to an electrical outlet and stuck it in. You walk in and see that your baby is being run through with a series of 110

volts. What do you do? Camera pans women in audience who are sighing and clutching their chests. Camera swings back to fireman in uniform. He barks, 'Do Not Touch the Child! Call 911 and then shut off the main fuse and Wait!' Oprah asks, 'Well ladies, do you know where your main fuse box is? You better find out!' I sit through a Diet Pepsi commercial and stare at the terrace through the window. I think, what if I just held my breath like I did when I was a kid and pretended it was the high dive and just ran out there and went over the edge really fast before I had time to remember what I was doing? But by then Oprah was back and taking questions/comments from the audience. One woman said, 'How long would you have to do all this stuff before the child died?' Officially, the fireman said about fifteen seconds tops. Loud sighs and small cries of protest from the audience. 'Fifteen seconds!' Oprah screeched. 'What if your fuse box is in the back of the house? 911 can't get there in fifteen seconds anyway!' They were shaking their heads, setting their jaws, folding their arms defiantly across their chests, and just plain refusing to accept this scene. The fireman started to look kind of scared. Like he was in a room full of furies who might just dismember him any second as they did Pentheus for violating their sacred space. Oprah started to sum it all up, and reached the unspeakable but evidently true conclusion that what you were supposed to do in such a situation was just make yourself look really busy and authoritative to take your mind off the fact that you were watching your child get electrocuted. So one woman then shrieked from the audience, 'Why can't you just pull the kid off?' Now the fireman was back on solid ground, 'Ma'am, the child's body has at this point become a conductor of electricity. You would merely get electrocuted yourself if you did that.' Oprah started circling him like she was a lioness and he was an exhausted zebra ready to lie down and give up any second. The women in the audience were all one. They would not take this for an answer. They wanted this man to tell them how to save that child, they did not want to hear that it would be impossible.

By now I was one of the Eumenides. As a chorus, the women all begin to speak at once. They would touch the baby anyway. The fireman was appalled. 'Ladies, ladies please,' he cried out; 'that would be utter madness, that would be suicide. You would not save the child, you would only kill yourself.' They did not care. Implacably, they held to their position. 'Are you saying you could just stand there and watch your child die?' Oprah bellowed. Break to commercial. When we got back, the fireman was gone. I was still with those women. I couldn't jump. Deleuze did. Could I have jumped if he jumped before me and I thought I might be able to catch him as he fell? Probably. I tried to imagine these women waiting for their husbands to come home. 'How was your day dear?' 'Well, the baby put a hairpin in the electric socket while I was emptying the dishwasher. I called 911 and tried to turn off the main fuse, but it was too late. I did all I could.' I flipped off the switch on the TV and the computer, and for the next three days I just sat there. And thought about gender, again.

The problem with 'butch/femme' as I see it is that it tends to be 'theorized' *after* the 'fact' of its acknowledgment. While those of us who work in Queer Cultural Studies are presumably asking questions about *how* variously gendered identities get made, there is a tendency in discussions of butch/femme for the ontological mode to creep into the discourse. In their jointly written article, 'Butch-Femme Obsessions' (*Feminist Review*, 1990) Susan Ardill and Sue O'Sullivan raised numerous questions about the resurgence of butch/femme in contemporary lesbian communities that remain largely representative of the way in which questions about butch/femme are articulated. Wisely, Ardill and

O'Sullivan do not offer definitive answers. For notice that the questions posed – 'What is a femme's relationship to butch masculinity?' 'Is the contradiction between butchness and femmeness the exciting ingredient for the femme?' 'Who is the other and who looks at whom?' – would require implicating butch/femme as an ontology. The verb 'to be' is prominent in these questions; the responses can only then be testimonial. Thus we are perpetually returned to a discourse of desire that is *object-directed*. While I will not pretend to be able to escape from this ontological conundrum myself, hence my own opening testimony, I do want to address the question of butch/femme from a perspective that challenges inherent ontological presumptions.

In Sue-Ellen Case's ground-breaking article, 'Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic', she explicitly rejects a Lacanian analysis of desire. Case's often-cited phrase, that butch/femme 'replace[s] the Lacanian slash with a lesbian bar', occupied a large part of my thinking about butch/femme for a number of years. Specifically, I kept wondering what a 'lesbian bar' would signify as opposed to a Lacanian one. Finally I asked Case what she meant by 'a lesbian bar', and she explained to me that it was a nightclub for lesbians. That is not what I had in mind. I was curious about what the 'bar' (/) signified as a marker of division, or as a barrier, a prohibition. Growing up in the North American South, which lags about twenty years behind the rest of the country in many ways, I knew what it meant to be unclear about what position to take up in reference to butch/femme, and still negotiate 'being' a lesbian. I learned to be a 'femme' out of necessity, which is not to say that I was not in some sense already one.

Lacan theorizes that the 'truth' always arises from misrecognitions. My own misreading of 'the lesbian bar' leads me to ask how the bar (/) operates in butch/femme as well as the more recently constructed categories of femme/top and butch/bottom. As I point out in my forthcoming book, there is an implicit connection between butch/femme and S/M, which is rarely articulated. That lack of articulation is largely, I think, due to the fact that academic lesbian and queer theorists tend to shy away from the discussion of sex acts; instead, identities take their place, in a displacement that protects the writers from the justifiable fear of writing 'pornography'. Even pro-porn feminists tend to avoid discussing what lesbians *do*, and hence we are always mired in the question of 'who we are', which is often an accumulation of 'coming-out' narratives, albeit thinly-disguised.

Returning then to the issue of the bar: for Lacan, the slash signifies that the fulfillment of desire is impossible, i.e. there is always something *barring* it. Most importantly, this 'bar' is not an obstacle to desire; on the contrary, it is the bar that constitutes desire itself. For desire is, for Lacan, always the pursuit of a lost object, or, more precisely, a phantasmatic object, an object that-is-not-an-object. Not to mention an object that is-not-one. There can be as many objects as one can fantasize; it is not a question of the object's status, or number, or content. Rather what is constitutive of desire is that the object is *necessarily* phantasmatically 'lost'. If one were in fact to 'find' it, desire itself would cease. Now when one thinks about this in regard to the widespread myth about lesbian desire and its 'death' (lesbian bed-death, or as one of my students once innocently but poignantly transposed the phrase, 'lesbian death-bed') one could say that lesbian desire is an exemplary case of Lacanian desire *fulfilled*, and hence within this psychoanalytic framework, desire *annihilated*. In part, the myth of lesbian bed-death is merely another way to perpetuate the notion that women can't really have sex with each other, or that when they do, it has a short life, a phase if you will. This issue strikes me

as especially pertinent in discussions of butch/femme. For what this nominated coupling could signify is the famous Lacanian credo that *desire is the desire of the Other*. As Joan Copjec has explained lucidly, this Lacanian 'aphorism . . . is often taken to mean that the subject fashions itself in the image of the Other's desire'. And that misunderstanding of Lacan is clearly politically and intellectually problematic. It is, I think, such a misunderstanding that leads feminists to renounce Lacanian psychoanalytic accounts of desire's mechanism. But as Copjec goes on to explain:

my particular interest is in the problem this position presents for feminism. For when this assumption is combined with the uncovering of a masculinist bias in the ordering of social relations, then woman can only be comprehended as a realization of male desires, she can only be seen to see herself through the perspective of a male gaze. (Copjec, 1989, p. 238)

It seems obvious enough that this problem is also present in discourse concerning butch/femme, for it is often assumed that the femme is 'invisible' without the presence of the butch. It is, in other words, the butch's visibility that brings the femme into focus *as a femme*, otherwise she simply disappears into the optical field occupied by the heterosexual woman. Without the butch, too many narratives of lesbian desire espouse, the femme in essence does not exist. She is what activates the butch's *desire*, but she is not necessary in order for the butch to be recognized as a lesbian. The reverse discourse does not apply, despite many protestations. This is due to an understanding of desire that remains optical and object-oriented. However, when one understands desire as a scene of fantasy, this issue becomes a moot point. Copjec continues:

Lacan's answer to this mistaken interpretation of his formula is simply that we have no image of the Other's desire (it remains indeterminate), and it is this very lack which *causes* our desire. It is first of all an *unsatisfied* desire that initiates our own, one that is not filled up with meaning, or has no signified. That desire is *unsatisfiable* is a secondary truth resulting from this primary condition. (*ibid.*)

Of course if one takes the position that the 'subject' is not formed in/through language, then one is able to sidestep this whole issue, and speak of the 'being' of subjects as if they were there prior to their enunciations. Those of us, however, who do accept that 'subjects' are discursive formations, cannot exempt butch/femme from this primary condition. This 'bar', however, is not to be misunderstood as an absolute barrier, an obstacle. What one must accept, and attempt to work to one's own pleasure, is the *threat* inherent in risking the expression of desire. As Judith Butler explains, 'The condition for the subject's survival is precisely the foreclosure of what threatens the subject most fundamentally; thus the "bar" produces the threat and defends against it at the same time' (Butler, 1997, p. 135, my emphasis). To embrace either a butch or femme identity is to take up a place in a symbolic order. It need not be *the* symbolic order; and I don't think butch/femme finds its location there. Nevertheless, it remains a nomination; it is a linguistic act. And therefore, it entails a certain risk to 'survival', as do all entries into speech. As Butler explains further: 'Acting one's place in language continues the subject's viability, where that viability is held in place by a threat both produced and defended against, the threat of a certain dissolution of the subject' (*ibid.*, p. 136). What desire as it is articulated within or against *any* symbolic system then generates is a certain call to

'losing one's self'. Again, to cite Copjec, 'An incitement to discourse is not an incitement to being. What is aroused instead is the desire for non-being, for an indeterminate something which is perceived as extra discursive. This indeterminate something . . . that causes the subject has historical specificity (it is the product of a specific discursive order), but no historical content' (Copjec, 1989, pp. 238–9).

As we know, 'Woman' has often been the *sign* that has marked this extra-discursive site, which is precisely why Lacan marks The Woman with a slash through the article. She is barred, which is to say precisely that she is the marker, the placeholder, of this necessary lack that constitutes desire. The majority of discussions about butch/femme place the femme in much the same, if not a parallel, position. The femme operates, like the Woman, as an incitement to non-being, which ironically gives shape, substance, and coherence to the butch. The Femme exists, as it were, *under* what I want to call 'the sign of the cross', to signify that she is the sign that constitutes the barrier to desire, and to allude to what I think is a theological desire embedded in this Lacanian conception of sexual desire, to which I will return momentarily.

'Lesbian bed-death' jokes aside, there is a tradition of writing about lesbian desire that posits it as impossible, belated, only 'happening' in the 'afterwards' of the passion *per se*. A kind of lesbian melancholia. Most recently, Carolyn Allen has made some fascinating observations about this 'tradition' in which lesbian desire is theorized as an eroticization of loss (*Following Djuna*, 1996). The tradition that Allen discusses stands in counterpoint to the more popular lesbian narrative in which girl meets the 'right' girl and keeps her, living happily ever after. Following Allen, one can see that lesbian writers such as Djuna Barnes, Bertha Harris, Jeannette Winterson, and Rebecca Brown write narratives in which it is the 'lost object' that is the site of desire. This is not the desire *to* desire, so famously discussed by Mary Ann Doane and others who notice quite rightly that women in representation are often shown to be incapable of occupying any position other than that of the 'beloved', rather this lesbian tradition that Allen has mined, is about the desire *for* desire, and that requires that desire's object is always already lost. This is, of course, not in the least particular to lesbian desire, but neither is it particular to heterosexual or male homosexual desire. 'We are talking about fucking', says Lacan, 'and we are saying that it is impossible.' How many of us have not said so ourselves, despite Lacan's universalizing, royal 'we'?

If indeed the finding of the object necessitates a breakage of desire's circuit, then what? Lacan is essentially writing about desire in language, as is Allen, rewriting Freud from a semiotic perspective. Perhaps desire's 'object' can only be 'found' in/through language, where it is necessarily posited as a loss. (I am reminded of a performance titled, 'Too Much Talking and Not Enough Fucking' (Salley May, unpublished, 1992).) Freud also implied that the object of desire could not be found, but he did say that it could be *refound* – 'the finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it' (Freud, 1962, p. 88). In this sense, it is the quest for an object of desire that is external to oneself that is futile, whereas the object of desire is in fact an internal site. The hapless journey is the one external to the self, the quest for difference. Finding the internalized 'object' is so difficult because it resembles the same; like the purloined letter, it is too obvious to detect. But this is perhaps where *same sex* desire has a certain advantage and constitutes a difference.

If we propose that desire has more to do with a search for internalized similarities, then perhaps the 'bar' could be understood as a barring of the object. Rather than the

bar in butch/femme signifying that difference is constitutive of the erotic exchange, I am suggesting that desire between 'same-sex' couples may be more about an aggressive urge to incorporate and the tension produced by the desire to resist that incorporation. The bar as signifier of difference evokes the Aristotelian notion of an originary coupling, which becomes divided and instigates a quest for the 'other half' that is the lost part of one's original self. In this respect, the desire for unity or oneness is ironically a recognition of the inevitability of separation. Lacan follows Aristotle in this sense, for desire is itself the pursuit, whereas the finding of the 'other' (half) would imply an end to desire.

It is important to remember that the context for Freud's position on the 'finding of an object' as a *refinding* is the prototypical image of the love relation embodied in the infant suckling at the mother's breast. This is dangerous territory for a queer theorist to revisit, for there has been much work done to *undo* the coupling of lesbian desire as pre-Oedipal, infantilized, or primarily narcissistic. The reasons for this are many and varied, but I think the overarching resistance to such a formulation of lesbian desire consists in undoing the dominant cultural presumption that all lesbians are the same, which of course undermines any effort to understand the eroticization of differences that take place through race, age, ethnicity, class, and any number of other imaginable eroticized cultural constructions. There is also the problem of the dominant culture's de-eroticization of mothers, underwritten by the incest prohibition. These are political and cultural presumptions that are understandably necessary to undo.

However, I want to speculate that there is another 'problem' with theorizing lesbian genders as a refinding of the object through similarity, one that is perhaps less recognized, even a repressed component of some lesbian imaginaries. For to refind the object through similarity would seem to mandate that projection is constitutive of this desire. We know that the ego is formulated through a series of identifications, and that identification is not the same as recognition (which implies an awareness that the 'other' is not the 'same'). If identifications are mostly made through projecting onto the other what one cannot locate (recognize) within oneself, then desire recaptures those traits of the other by incorporating them, an introjection of what was already there, circuiting through the pathway of the other. Along with such a psychic pathway, there would necessarily, it would seem, be a strong element of paranoia. For the basic formulation of paranoia consists in the expression – 'the other is in *my place*'. Such a reading of desire's path is resonant with Laplanche's and Pontalis's now widely-held understanding of desire as a scene, a setting, a location – the *place* of fantasy, rather than the pursuit of an object. The resistance to understanding lesbian desire in such a way would then be twofold: first, it would imply that there is a strong element of aggression in such desire, for the movement from projective identification to incorporation to paranoia would add a powerful element of risk that one or the other member of the 'couple' would have to 'annihilate' the other in order to put herself in her 'proper place'. That is to say, for the place of fantasy to exist at all, the coupling would be more like a power struggle, where one must win and the other lose, in order for desire to be manifest. It would then only be 'realizable' after the departure (death) of one member of the couple. Loving in the afterwards (afterworld?) – a theological (theoretical?) Desire.

Annette Baier has written about the dangers of 'Unsafe Loves', the seemingly universal necessity for love weighed against the perilous emotions that most often attend it: 'paralyzing grief or reckless despair at the loss or death of loved ones, retreat into a sort of psychic hibernation when cut off from the "news" of them, crippling anxiety when

they are in danger, helpless anguish when they are in pain, crushing guilt when one has harmed them, deadly shame when one fails them' (Baier, 1991, pp. 433–4). Fear of these dangerous emotions that accompany love has led, Baier argues, to an entire philosophical tradition of 'misamorism', a tradition which she refers to as theological. Moving through Plato, St Augustine, Descartes, Kant, and other philosophers, Baier traces the variations on this 'misamorism' noting that each philosopher points out that human love is bound to be dissatisfying. Freud and Lacan both, of course, concur in this. Freud points out that he must conclude, however disagreeably, that there is something in the nature of human love that is inherently inclined to dissatisfaction; Lacan says perhaps more simply and emphatically that the love relationship is impossible. The common feature that Baier locates among the misamorists is that 'human persons are unlovable. We can love, but only our betters, and our fellow persons are rarely much better. So [Kant, for example] can suppose that respect depends upon averting one's gaze from the possibly "loathsome" full actuality of the respected person. Friendship and love between human persons is dangerous because it risks mutual knowledge' (*ibid.*, p. 438). The misamorists turn toward a theological love for in it there can be no expectation of mutuality, or of knowledge. One must believe that one is loved by one who is infinitely superior and ultimately unknowable. To put it slightly differently, one is secure (safe) in one's condition as inalterably inferior and, concomitantly and perhaps more importantly – one *knows one's place*. There is no risk involved of shifting locations, through incorporation, introjection, or appropriation. Most significantly, Baier writes, 'only in the theological tradition has love ever been thought of as life-prolonging for the human lover, as a measure against mortality' (*ibid.*, p. 446).

This returns me to the second half of the twofold fear of desire as a love/quest for the 'same' and the resistance to positing lesbian desire in such terms. For to go back to the notion of projective identifications as the catalysing operative in 'same-sex' desire, it is certainly possible that projective identifications can be psychically indistinguishable from identifications in which the other *does* contain within herself the *same* or at least a very similar set of identifications. In other words, one may find oneself 'in love' with another because she does reflect one's own image back to oneself, which is not the same thing as saying that one is projecting *onto* the other one's own (disavowed) identifications. The good news, I suppose, would be that differences are not necessarily erased or annihilated in such an exchange of desire; the bad news would be that one, especially one in love, would be unable to determine whether the *site* of desire was internal or external, which could lead in turn to a psychic loss of boundaries, a merging that is so famously frequent between women anyway. The consequence could easily enough become a merging of self and other in which one's 'self' was no longer identifiable as separate, and worse, not only *between* the pair of lovers, but *within* each individual of the couple.

In Western cultures in particular, where the notion of an autonomous 'self' tends to be conflated with the 'ego' (despite the inherent contradictions of such a collapse if we understand the 'ego' as an accumulation of psychic identifications with *others*) and where such an autonomy of the 'self' is indeed valued above all other relationships, this formulation of desire is likely to lead to aggressive efforts to 'recapture' oneself from the 'imprisonment' of the other. It may also, however, be the very mechanism that is the *incitement* and perhaps even the fulfillment of desire, i.e. 'losing one's self in the erotic relationship'.

Let me return now to some brief considerations about the function of the 'lesbian bar', which I am reading as a barrier, separation, or divide in butch/femme. One of the ways that butch/femme 'works', both erotically and socially, is as a disciplinary mechanism. It keeps us in 'our places', ostensibly. Yet of course it does not always, or maybe not even often, accomplish that goal. It may, in fact, be a barrier to either a butch's or a femme's ability to recognize her own desires. One thinks of the ubiquitous phrase, 'butch in the streets, femme in the sheets', and cannot refrain from noticing that there is an element of shaming in that phrase. Pointing this out, I do not by any means intend to imply that 'discipline' or 'shame' are de-eroticizing.¹ Nonetheless, it is curious to notice that one rarely if ever hears the phrase transposed – 'femme in the streets, butch in the sheets'. Perhaps the more recently devised categories of 'butch bottom' and 'femme top' are meant to account for such switching. Yet, there is a difference between being hailed as a 'butch bottom' and being called a 'femme in the sheets', and a 'femme top' is *not* a 'butch in the sheets', she remains a 'femme', though she assumes the dominant position in the sexual exchange. Linguistically, at any rate, butches are at least acknowledged as having the possibility of switching between these two categories in terms of *identity*. But a femme is a femme is a femme.

Furthermore, one does not hear of butch tops or femme bottoms very often, presumably because such categories would be redundant. When one then maps out the relationship of lesbian genders (within the clearly impoverished four categories most often articulated) in relation to sexual acts, one sexual coupling *alone* is clearly left out of this geography of desire. What is possible in these couplings consists in this: a butch (top) and a femme (bottom); a butch (top) and a butch (bottom); a femme top and a butch bottom, a femme top and a femme bottom, but *not* a femme/butch relationship² (i.e. a femme in the 'streets' who becomes a 'butch in the sheets' with a butch in the streets who becomes a femme in the sheets). What the butch/femme 'bar' may then preserve by prohibition is the permeability, or transposition, of *both* the butch's and the femme's identities *simultaneously*, a possibility that leads to the apparently apocalyptic fear of the loss of (a) 'self' through mutual merging. 'Poise of my hands reminded me of yours' writes William Empson, famously the author of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. Is the eighth type of ambiguity the unspeakably terrifying possibility that *both* lovers could lose 'themselves' in the love of the other? Must one of us remain on the shores of the Symbolic in order to assure the other's return? And to what then, do we return? While there is much talk of butch/femme coupling as an erotics of ambiguity, there remains, for me, the problem of the 'femme' occupying the position that *clarifies* the ambiguity. I do not mean to suggest that femmes *resolve* the ambiguity; on the contrary, I am concerned, precisely, with the way in which the butch/femme couple enters into the visual field. In this sense, to 'sight' the butch/femme as a couple appears to depend upon clarification, albeit from a marginalized perspective. Nonetheless, what this coupling risks instantiating is the subject/object dyad that some feminists, particularly those who embrace a postmodern perspective, seek to render obscure. In this sense, 'femme femininity' is in danger of occupying a position parallel to that of The Woman in masculinist discourse – the sign for that which exceeds representation, the Lacanian 'not-all'. In this sense, the femme might easily slide into a position signifying yet another gendered metaphysics. As Elizabeth Wright reminds us, 'there is an intrinsic undecidability in writing *which is not ambiguity* and which is beyond any fixed genderization. Yet it is to

be called "feminine," and therein lies the danger of a new metaphysics, despite the fact that men are not barred from this position' (Wright, 1989, p. 144).

The dominant cultural imperative, a leftover of Enlightenment metaphysics and a structuring mechanism in the misamorist model of theological love, mandates the maintenance of an autonomous self as a fundamental survival mechanism. Furthermore, this mandate is one that is gendered, with 'masculinity' charged with the responsibility and necessity of preserving this autonomy by warding off 'femininity' (both within and projected outward onto The Woman/Femme, who is barred). Despite the fact that this 'self' is frequently conflated with the 'ego', psychoanalysis does not support such a construction. The psychoanalytic self is irremediably relational, and hence, most paradoxically, differentiated.

Reworking Empson, lesbians might find much fetishistic pleasure and some enticing (word)play, in this possibility: 'Poise of *her* hand reminded me of . . .'. Well we certainly know what the poise of our lovers's hands might *remind* us of, a reminder that does not merely evoke the past, but, if we are lucky, propels us into a return to that past that elicits the desire for its repetition in the present and/or the future. That strikes me as one way to escape from the melancholia of the 'afterwards'. Risking a bit more, what if the 'Poise of *her* hands reminded me of *her*'?



Emilyn Claid in *Le Flesh* (Liane Harris, 1996)

Afterword

JUDITH BUTLER

I sat down to read these essays, thinking that I would get through them quickly, write something up, send it off. In other words, I thought that this is one of the tasks that I might do in a few days, like many others that cross my desk. I started to read, beginning with Heather Findlay's piece, 'Losing Sue', and found that there was no way to continue to read without stopping for awhile to take in what was painful and challenging in what she has written. And as I read the essays by Sue-Ellen Case, Judith Halberstam, Judith Roof, Jewelle Gomez, Esther Newton and others, I found myself moved and needing to pause, since what is being written here is not just another academic argument, but some piece of cross-generational writing in which my own life is entwined, a part of my life which I do not often write about in a personal way, which often stays at a distance from this practice of writing that I do. Perhaps my theory is nothing other than what Halberstam would call reluctant butch disclosure – reluctant and oblique – but what other sort of language do I have? I promised Sally Munt I would be done weeks ago, and here I am, stymied. The problem wasn't just that I was reading about my own life. Not quite. Those lives are not quite mine, and yet mine resonates with theirs, and these pages give language and history to a set of daily political and psychic struggles that preoccupy my life, connecting me with a community that is compelling and difficult to acknowledge. I breathed easier to read some of my own sexual life offered up in discourse and affirmed, and appreciated the struggle to establish a language which makes such lives intelligible and survivable in the context of insistent and insidious homophobia. And yet, I also held my breath, wondering how much of a sexual life can be finally captured by such discourse, wondering whether our typologies both enable and restrict us, whether categories do not finally have to submit to an undoing by the very sexuality to which they seek to give life. Do soft butches fear categories? I don't know. But my attraction and suspicion seemed to suspend my own writing, suggesting that this is an impasse to which I need to return, for which perhaps a different kind of writing is necessary.

I confess that I worried that these essays might be a series of personal confessionals, isolated and self-referential, or a set of typologies that would set up new norms under which to suffer. Throughout this volume, however, the autobiographical is woven into a history that is trying to be told, and also with a theoretical effort to render intelligible lives that are consistently removed from perception and liveability. And there is also a pervasive sense of being at once constructed by prevailing norms and struggling to construct something new from them. Indeed, posed and reposed here is the exhilarating question not only of whether there might be a lesbian history, but whether there might be a butch history, and a femme history, and whether they might be told in ways that do not presuppose a dialectical dependency of the one on the other. Everywhere the question seems to turn on whether one set of identities or relations are *extricable* from another, suggesting that categories have become causally entangled in knots that must be

undone. Must butch/femme be seen as derivative of heterosexuality? Can the history and meaning of the lesbian femme be separated from femininity within heterosexuality? Can bisexuality be rethought as distanced from both normative heterosexuality and normative lesbianism? Can butch be understood as something other than a participation in masculine privilege? And can the desire to tell the history and theorize the position of the femme or the butch be done in such a way that the one does exist without the other as a necessary and elided point of reference? Indeed, can 'masculinities' be replayed outside of the framework of men, of the normative heterosexual models in such a way that female-to-male transsexuals, drag kings, and transgendered persons attest to the travels of masculinity beyond the scope of the straight male?

On the one hand, securing a finer sense of differentiation among these categories might be understood to verge on a form of particularism that privileges the refinement of identity categories as the goal of contemporary sexual discourse. On the other hand, it seems that this insistence on distinction emerges precisely in a context in which the reductive collapse of such categories into one another is rampant, that is, in a regulatory sexual culture in which butch/femme couples appear as nothing other than poor imitations of heterosexual norms, where the femme is presumed to be straight, where the butch is understood as trying to be a man, where the woman of colour is presumed to be butch, where the bisexual is presumed to be always faking or lying somewhere, and where psychiatric efforts at normalization are ready with their dismissive vocabularies at every turn. The pages of this volume are thus rife with the labour of negation, but also resist the dialectical oppositions that underwrite the prevailing modes of sexual perception that orchestrate who will become visible, and how. If the 'femme' can only appear flanked by the 'butch', is this not because of a prior assumption at work that assumes that every visible form of femininity is straight until proven otherwise? To distrust the figure of the lesbian femme as one who is always almost straying into heterosexual territory is precisely to fail to see what makes sexual seeing possible: prevailing regulatory norms of perception that confer ontological possibility on sexual subjects to the extent that they conform with prior normative expectations of gender, where there are men and there are women, and sexual desire is an exclusive function of their relation.

The work to distinguish and extricate the thinking of one category from the other, then, seems to take place against the assumption that each might be reduced to the other, and all of them might be reduced to the self-ratifying operations of heterosexual normativity. But what is the background figure of heterosexuality at work here? When we refer to normative heterosexuality, do we know precisely what we mean? Clearly, we know the insults that come from that direction, the pain of being butch in a sexual field that cannot acknowledge the sexuality at work, that either reduces the butch to a copy of the straight man or presumes her asexuality. The pain of having femmeness misread as either straightness or cowardice, of not having the history of femme courage and style marked visibly within both queer and straight communities. We know too well these reductive forms of seeing and naming, the ways in which the struggle to attain an affirmative and liveable existence is incessantly thwarted by regulatory powers that make various forms of non-heterosexual desire unseeable, unliveable, impossible. But are these instruments of homophobia the same as normative heterosexuality? Have we begun to construct heterosexuality as a normative monolith in order to set into relief the variegations of non-heterosexual desire as the unambiguous and uncontaminated forces of sexual opposition? Have we unwittingly accepted a unitary and monolithic

understanding of normative heterosexuality in order to offer a highly differentiated set of alternatives to this supposedly singular model of the sexual norm? How, for instance, does race cut across that relation of margin and centre? If the norm is white, and if the opposition to the norm is also white, then this is a staging of struggle that, to a certain extent, remains within racially dominant paradigms and extends their power.

Moreover, if we claim, as I believe we must (and here I speak in the invocatory grammar of the 'we' of future solidarity), that the various modes of desire and gender articulated here cannot be reduced to or derived from heterosexual normativity, does that mean that there is no relation between that normativity and its counter-instances worth exploring? Do the various practices of desire and identity in the process of articulation here not in some way contest and disrupt the internal coherence and dominance of heterosexual normativity itself? If we proliferate the possibilities on the margin without disrupting the centre, then we have unwittingly preserved the distinction between margin and centre rather than contributed to a more fatal displacement of heterocentrism.

It makes good sense to argue that the work of this anthology is not 'about' heterosexuality, and that the return to heterosexuality as point of reference is precisely one of the problems with the theorization of lesbian desire that always and only refers back to the heterosexual as its animating origin. This is, of course, an important and even indisputable point. But the problem, once again, is to get to the place where one can make two different sorts of claims simultaneously: lesbianism cannot be reduced to or explained in terms of dominant heterosexual norms *and* the relationship between lesbianism and dominant heterosexuality cannot be refused without risk, and remains to be theorized. A non-reductive approach to the relationship seems important first of all because it is imperative to theorize from a perspective that does not fear contamination and, hence, is not driven by the need to purify one's desire of all traces of the opposition: thus elevating repudiation to the status of a heuristic, the theory comes to suffer from precisely that which it cannot afford to see. Moreover, writing in such a mode constitutes the oblique work of shame, and no radical sexual politics should be in the business of promoting sexual shame. Second, it is crucial to remember that heterosexuality is itself beset by its own constitutive homosexual anxieties; it is not as separate or separable from the sexual minorities from which it tenaciously tries to distance itself. Indeed, it can only produce its ideal contours through a systematic repudiation of its own homosexual possibility (producing the homosexual precisely as the domain of the psychically unliveable). The regulatory operation of heterosexual norms idealizes heterosexuality through purifying those desires and practices of their instabilities, crossings, the incoherences of masculine and feminine and the anxieties through which the borders of those categories are lived.

It seems to me that no queer theory can think repudiation and its consequences without an appropriation of psychoanalysis. After all, norms demand identifications, and identifications engage both refusal and phantasy. To the extent that heterosexuals identify with heterosexual norms, they are not quite the same as the norms to which they aspire. The gap between the norm and its identificatory instance is precisely the moment in which anxiety over the failure of heterosexuality shows itself as constitutive of heterosexuality itself.

Lesbians who maintain an identification with heterosexual norms are not for that reason heterosexuals: identification is not identity, and the incommensurability between the norm and its instance means that heterosexuality can circulate without the existence

of heterosexuals. For lesbians to insist that no part of their desire is informed by heterosexual norms is not quite believable, given the regimes of contemporary cultural norms that craft sexual desire. The question that remains to be interrogated, though, is: what happens to those norms as they are redeployed, reanimated, and restaged in lesbian contexts? Do they lose their force and presumed integrity? Does heterosexuality become separable from heterosexuals, masculinity from men, and femininity from straight women, concepts deterritorialized and expropriated, each one set free from its regulatory purpose within the gender matrix? Many of these essays focus on this *repetition* of the sexually normative *within and as* the practice of sexual minorities that disassembles the heterosexual apparatus, dismembering it piece by piece, recirculating it in spheres where it was surely never meant to travel, disjoining categories of gender from desire and recombining them in ways that disrupt and restructure the sexual field. The effect is to dismantle the very edifice of heterosexual normativity, showing that its various 'parts' do not always work in concert, that they may be appropriated and recirculated independently, and that, finally, the heterosexual center does not hold.

Of course, the political need to specify lesbian existence and desire requires that the line be drawn somewhere: heterosexuality is over there, and lesbianism is over here. A butch is not a man, does not want to be a man, but is a woman who wants her women a certain way. A lesbian femme is not straight, and is not in love with straightness. There is certainly relief and exhilaration in such statements: it gives a certain integrity to the butch and to the femme, installing them both unambiguously in a lesbian world, sealing off that world from its heterosexual other, staking territory. But does drawing such a line give us access to the butch's pain, does it give us a way to address both the excitement and the shame of being both inside and outside of heterosexual norms? Does it give us a way to think the situation of the bisexual femme or to take account of the lesbian's 'straight' past, when it exists, in a mode other than repudiation? When we attend to the texture of what we are here calling non-heterosexual practices, crossings between them are everywhere. Some forms of bisexual practice not only cross that line, but muddle the very possibility of drawing the line. If a bisexual woman is not quite straight, even betrays straightness by her refusal to offer absolute sexual loyalty to its norm, she is also not quite a lesbian, if we understand lesbianism to require an exclusive commitment to women. Clare Hemmings' essay insists, though, that certain contemporary formations of the bisexual femme are only possible in reference to lesbian culture. And this seems an important point to acknowledge. But is the distinction between heterosexual and lesbian culture a clear and distinct one? Who draws it and, most importantly, who patrols it?

In effect, these categories that cross, such as the bisexual femme, expose the impurity of categorization itself. The line is supposed to differentiate straight from lesbian, but the line is contaminated by precisely that which it seeks to ward off: it bounds identity through the very same gesture by which it differentiates itself; the gesture by which it differentiates itself becomes the border through which contamination travels, undermining differentiation itself.

Is this undermining, this crossing over, that disrupts the seamless work of categorization a political liability? If what is lesbian cannot be specified by a refined and final operation of discursive categorization and typology, will it lose its political salience? I think not. Consider the forms of alliance that are implicitly and explicitly made in this volume: butch, femme, transgender, drag king, bisexual. Consider as well the efforts to

come to terms with the racial codings of butch and femme identities, and with the kind of bravery that is summoned by poor and working-class lesbians whose butch and femme lives expose them to economic vulnerability. The relation between lesbians and gay men is not explored here, but it seems true that contemporary lesbian style not only borrows from gay male culture, but has been profoundly affected by the political alliances between lesbians and gay men in the last fifteen years.

Jewelle Gomez suggests that butch and femme were the first instances of transgender within queer culture, the brave and unexpected appropriation of gender roles, the practice of gender trespass. But transgender presents a quandary that any future theorization of butch/femme will have to address. Heather Findlay articulates part of the problem here when, implicitly refuting Gomez's postulation of a *continuity* between butch/femme and transgender, she asks whether there are any butches left in San Francisco who are not in the process of becoming men. On the one hand, lesbian scholarship wants to affirm the specificity and irreducibility of the butch as part of lesbian history and culture: a butch is not a man, and ought not to be seen as trying to be one. On the other hand, what do we make of the number of butches who seek to cross over the line between butch and man? If we do not try to think through that relation, how will we be able to acknowledge and understand the desire that is clearly motivating an increasing number of butches as they make the transsexual turn?

The questions posed by transgender promise to become some of the most vexing and most important for the radical theorization of gender in the next decade. Is transgender a betrayal of lesbian identity, or is it the radical extension of the butch/femme challenge to gender norms? Does it support the most idealized and recalcitrant forms of gender norms, or does it expose the way in which every body 'becomes' its gender? Does it submit to a medicalization and normalization of the gendered body, or is it an active appropriation of medical and surgical resources in the service of making a life more liveable? Can we say for sure whether cosmetic surgery that seeks to enhance the ideal femininity of a body is radically different from transsexual surgery, or that either are radically distinct in their cultural meanings from piercing, as Lisa Walker asks? These questions have no easy answer, for once we accept that gender norms constitute our desire and fantasy, and seek to enter into the rearticulation of those norms, do we occupy a place outside of that circle by which we can judge: this is subversive, this is not; this is radical, this is reactionary? Making life liveable, taking lesbian lives out of the shackles of shame, developing a vocabulary that is rich enough to sustain such lives in language, may sometimes entail entering into radical uncertainty over what the borders of being a lesbian are.

Certainly, there are the visible styles of butch and femme, and this volume offers an array of descriptions that focus on the erotic interpretation of appearance (Smyth, Carolin and Bewley, among others). But this volume also focuses on what does not appear, but which nevertheless in its absence constitutes the 'scene' of lesbian desire (Cvetkovich and Rodriguez, for instance, on the ever receding, untouchable butch body and/or emotionality). And it reminds us as well of what threatens the realm of appearance, that dissolution of boundary that occurs when the lack that constitutes both butch and femme identity undermines the realm of appearance (Hart) or when anal eroticism becomes the site where gender difference becomes radically undecidable (Munt).

If sexuality always threatens to dissolve identity, then what is the final status of those categories by which we seek to understand our sexuality? Are they the conceptual means

by which we guard against the very sexuality that we seek to affirm? When we seek to judge what will be lesbian, and what will not, do we purport to know precisely what we cannot know? The rush to judgement forecloses the anxiety over the unknown. And yet, was it not the unknown, the not yet, and not ever fully known that drew us here, drew us together, and still, auspiciously, holds us apart?

Notes

Introduction

Notes

1. Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country* (London: Sheba Feminist Press, 1988), p. 9. Republished by Pandora Press, London, 1996.
2. Biddy Martin, 'Extraordinary homosexuals and the fear of being ordinary', in *Femininity Played Straight: The Significance of Being a Lesbian* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 47.
3. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 224.
4. Elspeth Probyn, *Outside Belongings* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 53, quoting Michel Foucault, *Foucault Live* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989).
5. Elizabeth Grosz, 'Refiguring lesbian desire', in *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), p. 182.
6. Significant parts of this argument are taken from a longer version in my book *Heroic Desire: Lesbian Identity and Cultural Space* (London: Cassell/New York: New York University Press, 1997).
7. 'Of all sweet passions Shame is loveliest', Lord Alfred Douglas, *In Praise of Shame*, December 1894. See further, Ed Cohen, *Talk on the Wild Side* (London: Routledge, 1994).
8. Nestle, *A Restricted Country*.
9. Thomas Scheff, 'Emotions and identity: a theory of ethnic nationalism', in Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994), pp. 277–303, p. 286.
10. Helen Block Lewis, *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis* (International Universities Press, 1971).
11. Scheff, 'Emotions and identity', p. 90.
12. Gershen Kaufman, *Shame: The Power of Caring* (Rochester, VT: Schenkman Books, 1992), p. 8.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 291.
14. Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).
15. Lacanian feminism is centrally concerned with this problem for women.
16. See Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1993); Judith Halberstam, 'Male identified women', Paper given at InQueery, InTheory, InDeed, The Sixth North American Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Studies Conference, Iowa City, 17–20 November 1994.
17. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Queer performativity: Henry James' *The Art of the Novel*', in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (1), pp. 1–16, p. 5. Sedgwick pursues the debates on shame in *Shame and Its Sisters*, edited by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), which is a reader of Silvan Tomkins's theories of affect.
18. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Queer performativity', p. 14.
19. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).
20. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 226.
21. Needless to say: not all narratives will be the same, nor can they be assimilated.
22. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991).
23. Diana Fuss, *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991), Introduction, p. 5.
24. See Ann Cvetkovich, 'Recasting receptivity: femme sexualities', in Karla Jay, *Lesbian Erotics* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 125–46.
25. Catherine Waldby, 'Destruction: boundary erotics and refigurations of the heterosexual male body', in Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn (eds), *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Camalities of Feminism* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 266–267.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 271.
27. See Katie King, 'Audre Lorde's lacquered layerings: the lesbian bar as a site of literary production', in Sally R. Munt, *New Lesbian Criticism: Literary and Cultural Readings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 51–74.
28. Clare Whatling, 'Reading away: Joan Nestle', in Joseph Bristow, *Sexual Sameness: Textual Differences in*

Lesbian and Gay Writing (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 210–26, p. 214.

1970s Lesbian Feminism Meets 1990s Butch–Femme

Notes

1. Radicalesbians coined this phrase in their 1970 essay 'Woman-identified woman'. The essay also represents as political practice many of the other virtues I mention here.
2. In the late 1960s and early 1970s prominent feminists referred to the presence of lesbians in the women's movement as the 'lavender menace'.
3. For a more complete analysis of this phenomenon, see my *A Lure of Knowledge: Lesbian Sexuality and Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
4. There are many recent essays on Sandra Bernhard's challenges to the relations among sexuality, gender, race, and ethnicity, including Jean Walton's 'Sandra Bernhard: lesbian postmodern or modern postlesbian', in Laura Doan (ed.), *The Lesbian Postmodern* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 244–61; Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman, 'Queer nationality', *boundary 2*, 19 (1) (1992), pp. 149–80; Tania Modleski, 'The white negress and the heavy-duty dyke', in Dana Heller (ed.), *Cross Purposes: Lesbian Feminists and the Limits of Alliance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 64–82.

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- Roof, Judith (1991) *A Lure of Knowledge: Lesbian Sexuality and Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Shelley, Martha (1976a) 'Confessions of a pseudo-male chauvinist'. In Barbara Grier and Coletta Reid (eds), *The Lavender Herring: Lesbian Essays from The Ladder*, pp. 93–97.
- Shelley, Martha (1976b) 'An erotic choice'. In Barbara Grier and Coletta Reid (eds), *The Lavender Herring: Lesbian Essays from The Ladder*, pp. 36–38.
- Showalter, Elaine (1987) 'Critical cross-dressing: male feminists and the woman of the year'. In Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (eds), *Men in Feminism*. New York: Methuen, pp. 116–37.
- Smith, Barbara (1982) 'Toward a black feminist criticism'. In Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (eds), *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, pp. 157–75.
- Walton, Jean (1994) 'Sandra Bernhard: lesbian postmodern or modern postlesbian'. In Laura Doan (ed.), *The Lesbian Postmodern*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 244–61.
- Without You I'm Nothing* (1990) A film with Sandra Bernhard. Directed by John Boscovitch. Management Company Entertainment Group.
- Zimmerman, Bonnie (1985) 'What has never been: an overview of lesbian feminist criticism'. In Elaine Showalter (ed.), *The New Feminist Criticism*. New York: Pantheon.

Making Butch

Notes

1. *Last Call at Maud's/The Maud's Project*. New York: Water Bearer Films, 1993. The bar was Maud's on Cole Street in San Francisco, also known as The Study.
2. This article has been published in many places, to my embarrassment. I did not retain the copyright and it was released by the press. One accessible collection is Henry Abelove, Michèle Barale and David Halperin (eds), *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 294–306.
3. This idea occurred thanks to a class paper written by Tricia Slusser.
4. The critic was named Bernard Weiner, who was pretty good on other political theatre.
5. Audre Lorde, *Zami A New Spelling of My Name: A Biomythography* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1982).
6. In Dana Heller (ed.), *Cross-Purposes: Lesbians, Feminists, and the Limits of Alliance*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 205–20.
7. Arlene Stein, 'All dressed up but no place to go? Style wars and the new lesbianism', *Outlook* (Winter 1989), 1 (4), pp. 34–42.

Between Butches

Notes

I presented a part of this essay as an introduction for Esther Newton's Kessler Lecture at CLAGS in December 1996. Because it was designed to introduce Esther's lecture, 'My Butch Career', my speech took the form of a tribute. I ended that tribute as follows: 'As butch culture flares up for a moment in its own peculiar and probably limited hour of glory, we should seize this opportunity to name our role models. My role model without a doubt is Esther Newton: husband to the drag queens, butch extraordinaire, a scholar and a gentleman.' This essay is dedicated to Esther Newton.

1. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). See also Lisa Duggan's work on butch homosociality in her forthcoming book *Sapphic Slashers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).
2. The distinction between feminine and femme is important here if only to say that this particular woman was not really remarking upon her general concerns about femme visibility. I am not making a distinction between femme and feminine in order to suggest that femme is political and feminine is unselfconscious. Rather I want to make her stakes in this conversation perfectly clear. This woman's particular femininity depended upon a conventional mode of self-presentation which included styled long hair, lack of gender ambiguity, make-up and women's clothing. She did not consider herself to be in drag as a woman and there were few signs of deliberate discrepancy between appearance and identity. As a friend commented to me, if this person really wanted to be perceived as masculine she could have made all kinds of adjustments to her appearance in order to produce the desired effect. Instead she just demanded to be read as potentially masculine. I should also add, however, that when in drag she made a convincing man.
3. This failure to imagine the forms and pleasures involved in femme desire clearly marks early sexological literature on 'female inversion' by Havelock Ellis, Freud and others. See Havelock Ellis, 'Sexual inversion in women', *Alienist and Neurologist*, 16 (1895), pp. 141–58, and Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic, 1962). For a great essay on sexological erasures of feminine lesbian desire see Jennifer Terry, 'Lesbians under the medical gaze: scientists search for remarkable differences', *Journal of Sex Research*, 27 (1990).
4. See Esther Newton, 'The mythic mannish lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the new woman', *Signs*, 9 (4) (Summer 1984), pp. 557–75.
5. My book *Female Masculinity* is forthcoming from Duke University Press in 1998. The other book, *Drag Kings: Queer Masculinities In Focus* is a collaboration with photographer Del LaGrace and is in progress.
6. Biddy Martin, 'Sexualities without genders and other queer utopias', *Diacritics*, 24 (2–3) (Summer–Fall 1994), p. 105.
7. *Ibid.*, p.112.
8. *Ibid.*, p.117.
9. *Ibid.*
10. At least one of Martin's targets in this essay is Eve Sedgwick, whom she accuses of stabilizing gender. Martin seems to suggest that Sedgwick mutes the potential complexity of lesbian genders by associating 'the cross-identified lesbian with sexuality, the lesbian-feminist with gender identification', and she renders 'the femme lesbian completely invisible' (*Ibid.*, p.108). In fact, Sedgwick, with her commitment to 'nonce taxonomies', her denaturalization of the homo-hetero binary and her provocative suggestions for other ways of organizing desire, precisely holds open the question of what happens to gender in the process of desire.
11. Lisa Duggan and Kathleen McHugh, 'A fem(me)inist manifesto', in *Women and Performance*, 8 (2), No. 16, Special issue 'Queer Acts', ed. Jose Muñoz and Amanda Barrett (1996), p. 154.
12. Sue-Ellen Case, 'Toward a butch-femme aesthetic', in Henry Abelove, Michèle Barale and David Halperin (eds), *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 295.
13. Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues: A Novel* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1993), p. 164.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
15. Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1972; reprinted 1979).
16. Judith Butler, 'Imitation and gender insubordination', in Diana Fuss (ed.), *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay*

- Theories (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), p. 20.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
 18. See Joan Nestle (ed.), *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* (Boston: Alyson Press, 1992).
 19. Newton, *Mother Camp*, p. 134.
 20. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
 21. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
 22. Esther Newton, 'Dick(less) Tracy and the homecoming queen: lesbian power and representation in gay male Cherry Grove', in Ellen Lewin (ed.), *Inventing Lesbian Cultures* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), pp. 161–93.
 23. Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), p. 79. (first published 1928).

Femme to Femme

Notes

1. Paula Graham, 'Looking lesbian: Amazons and aliens in science fiction cinema', in Belinda Budge and Diane Hamer (eds), *The Good, the Bad and the Gorgeous: Popular Culture's Romance with Lesbianism* (London: Pandora, 1994), pp. 197–217.
2. My use of the term *femme* is intended to render the potential distinction between heterosexual and lesbian femininity visible on the written page.
3. Andrea Weiss, *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in the Cinema* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992), p. 40.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
7. Joan Nestle, 'The femme question', in Joan Nestle (ed.), *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* (Boston: Alyson, 1992), p. 139.
8. Cheshire Calhoun, 'The gender closet: lesbian disappearance under the sign "women"', *Feminist Studies*, 21 (1995), p. 22.
9. Lisa Walker, 'How to recognize a lesbian: the politics of looking like what you are', *Signs*, 18 (1993), p. 881.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 868.
11. Michèle Barale, 'Below the belt: (un)covering *The Well of Loneliness*', in Diana Fuss (ed.), *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 237.
12. Richard Dyer, 'White', *Screen*, 29 (1988), p. 48.
13. Louise Allen, 'Salmonberries, consuming kd lang', in Tamsin Wilton (ed.), *Immortal/Invisible: Lesbians and the Moving Image* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 76.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, my emphasis.
16. Wendy Frost, 'Queen femme', in Lesléa Newman (ed.), *The Femme Mystique* (Los Angeles: Alyson, 1995), pp. 303–4.
17. Boze Hadleigh, *Hollywood Lesbians* (New York: Barricade Books, 1994), p. 214.
18. Contrary to the mass of lesbian-invested critical thinking on this matter, I believe that it is just as likely to be the 'straight' woman as her 'lesbian' counterpart who is the focus of lesbian interest on the screen. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that such moments testify to an 'omnipresent, though seldom articulated lesbian fantasy of appropriation, namely the desire to have and to hold, to steal away the heterosexually identified woman from the site of compulsory heterosexuality'. Clare Whatling, *Screen Dreams: Fantasizing Lesbians in Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 190–1.
19. Judith Butler, 'Imitation and gender insubordination', in Diana Fuss (ed.), *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 25.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Calhoun, 'The gender closet', p. 25.
22. Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 102.
23. Mykel Johnson, 'Butchy-femme', in Joan Nestle (ed.), *The Persistent Desire*, p. 397.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 397–8.
25. Indeed, this was true to the extent that the actress was alleged by her publicity machine to have had relationships with actor William Holden and producer Charles Feldman.
26. Hadleigh, *Hollywood Lesbians*, pp. 211–43. The conversation between author and actress is too long, and too charming, to summarize here.
27. Though it should be noted that Stanwyck maintained the fiction of her heterosexuality until the bitter end.
28. As Boze Hadleigh comments, 'This made its way in print in the *Hollywood Death Book* in 1992' (*Hollywood Lesbians*, p. 224), but has never been substantiated.

How Do We Look?

Notes

1. Judith Mayne, 'Lesbian looks: Dorothy Arzner and female authorship', in Bad Object-Choices (ed.), *How Do I Look?* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), p. 103.
2. Joan Nestle, 'Butch-femme relationships', in *A Restricted Country* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1987), p. 108.
3. Catherine Lord, 'Unsolved crimes: sex, gender and dykes', in the catalogue for *Gender, fucked*, The Centre for Contemporary Art, Seattle, June 18–August 23, 1996.

Waiting for No Man

Notes

1. Thanks go to Jo Eadie, David Hansen-Miller, Sally Munt and Merl Storr, for their careful readings and critiques of earlier drafts. Throughout this article I use the term 'bisexuality' in a number of different ways. Since one of the difficulties of theorizing bisexuality is precisely the number of different meanings it has (as potential, as

- hermaphrodite or androgyne, as the desire for people of both sexes and genders, to name but a few), I have tried to be clear throughout this article how bisexuality is being used (and how I am using it). For a more in-depth view of the different meanings bisexuality has currently and historically, see the volume of contemporary bisexual theory, Bi Academic Intervention (eds), *The Bisexual Imaginary: Representation, Identity and Desire* (London: Cassell, 1997).
2. Charlotte Raven, 'Swap shop, future sex', *Observer Life* (15 October 1995), pp. 10–11.
 3. Raven's depiction is not meant to be favourable. Her article is a diatribe against a contemporary trendy bisexual movement and identity. Bisexual writers have been consistently concerned to critique more blatantly 'negative' bisexual representations (as unstable, homophobic or untrustworthy, for example). For example, see Amanda Udis-Kessler, 'Challenging the stereotypes', in S. Rose, C. Stevens *et al.*, (eds), *Bisexual Horizons: Politics, Histories, Lives* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1996), pp. 45–57. Marjorie Garber also draws attention to the dominant unfavourable representations of bisexuals and bisexuality, and argues instead for 'bisexual readings' of 'lesbian', 'gay' or 'straight' representations in film and art; Marjorie Garber, *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995). The 'Editors' Introduction' to Bi Academic Intervention (eds), *The Bisexual Imaginary* (1997) proposes a shift in emphasis towards examining how bisexuality is produced through dominant representations rather than a rejection of those in favour of creating new, and supposedly 'truer' or 'less oppressive', images. This latter approach is closer to my own.
 4. Front cover, 'Bisexuality: Not gay. Not straight. A new sexual identity emerges', *Newsweek* (July 1995).
 5. Front cover, *Anything That Moves: The Magazine for the Bisexual-at-Large*, Issue No. 10 (Winter 1996).
 6. In another context I imagine it might be possible to read the 'woman' as a female-to-male transsexual. In the context of bisexual representation, though, it is important that the image is of two effeminate men and a butch woman.
 7. Marjorie Garber, *Vice Versa*, p. 156. Alternatively, bisexuality as 'in between' (gay and straight) is seen as parallel or equivalent to being 'mixed race'. Articles that exemplify that slippage include: Brenda Marie Blasingame, 'The roots of biphobia: racism and internalized heterosexism', in B. R. Weise (ed.), *Closer to Home: Bisexuality and Feminism* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1992), pp. 49–50; and, June Jordan, 'A new politics of sexuality', in S. Rose *et al.* (eds), *Bisexual Horizons*, pp. 11–15.
 8. Jo Eadie points out that the 'hemaphroditic' representation in the Raven piece remains unsatisfactory in that it only represents bisexual desire for a mixture of genitals and mammarys of white, shaven-headed people. It fails in its attempt to represent bisexual insatiability, since it does not represent the ways in which desire for sexed bodies and genders is also a raced desire. Jo Eadie, 'It's going to be more difficult than that: bisexual desire and its objects', paper presented at University of Sussex (February 1997).
 9. Speaking of the ways in which 'the feminine invert' has been viewed as 'the imperfect deviant', Nestle critiques Frank Caprio 'add[ing] the final blow: "[The feminine type of Lesbian] is more apt to be bisexual and also apt to respond favorably to treatment"' (Joan Nestle, 'The femme question', in J. Nestle (ed.), *The Persistent Desire: A Femme–Butch Reader* (Boston: Alyson, 1992), p. 143.
 10. See Frann Michel, 'Do bats eat cats? Reading what bisexuality does', in D. Hall and M. Pramaggiore (eds), *RePresenting Bisexuality: Subjects and Cultures of Fluid Desire* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1996), pp. 55–69, for another analysis of the relationship between bisexuality and femme.
 11. Wilhelm von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 9th edn (Stuttgart: Enke, 1894); Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1901), 3rd edn (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Co., 1928). See Merl Storr, 'The sexual reproduction of "race": bisexuality, history and racialization', in Bi Academic Intervention (eds), *The Bisexual Imaginary*, for a reading of bisexuality and 'race' in Krafft-Ebing.
 12. In a particularly conflicted passage on 'the women to whom the actively inverted woman is most attracted', Ellis further justifies their perversion by rendering them less attractive to men than heterosexual women. Thus the feminine woman Ellis is speaking of is 'the pick of the women whom the average man would pass by'. Ellis de-feminizes her at the same time as he accounts for her willingness to reciprocate the 'mannish woman's' advances: 'So far as they may be said to constitute a class, they seem to possess a genuine, though not precisely sexual, preference for women over men, and it is this coldness, rather than lack of charm, which often renders men rather indifferent to them'; Ellis, 'Sexual inversion in women', *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, p. 222.
 13. Ellis, 'Sexual inversion in men', *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, p. 86.
 14. Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928).
 15. Both Lisa Walker and Joan Nestle acknowledge that sexological paradigms prescribe the femme's place as beside her man, yet still see Mary's 'betrayal' as somehow a failure of will. Joan Nestle suggests that Stephen turns her lover over to Martin 'so she may have a chance at a "normal" life, thus enabling the author to make a plea for greater understanding of the deviant's plight', though she remains uncertain as to why Hall does not hold up Lady Una Troubridge, her life-partner, 'this steadfast femme woman' as an alternative role model; Joan Nestle, 'The femme question', p. 144. Lisa Walker, like Nestle, rather apologetically argues that both Mary and that other perverse heterosexual, Angela Crossby, lack 'the strength, or finally the desire, to stay "in the life"': Lisa Walker, 'How to recognize a lesbian: the cultural politics of looking like what you are', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 18 (4) (Summer 1993), p. 881. Both writers ignore the fact that, structurally, neither woman's desire can be written

- any other way than through bisexual displacement onto heterosexuality for it to make sense within the sexological paradigm Hall uses. Similarly, Esther Newton and Teresa de Lauretis gesture towards the importance of Mary, yet are unable to offer a positive critique; Esther Newton, 'The mythic mannish lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the new woman', in M. B. Duberman, M. Vicinus and G. Chauncey, Jr (eds), *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: New American Library, 1989); Teresa de Lauretis, 'Sexual indifference and lesbian representation', *Theatre Journal*, 40 (2) (1988), pp. 155–77.
16. Frann Michel, 'Do bats eat cats?', p. 60.
 17. Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, pp. 299–302.
 18. *Ibid.*, pp. 315ff.
 19. See also Jay Prosser's exemplary work on the production of the invert as early transgendered/transsexual rather than lesbian narrative in *The Well of Loneliness* and sexology; Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming).
 20. Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, *Lesbian/Woman* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972); Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of a She-Male* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979); Sheila Jeffreys, 'Butch and femme: now and then', in Lesbian History Group (eds), *Not a Passing Phase: Reclaiming Lesbians in History 1840–1985* (London: The Women's Press, 1993), pp. 158–87; Julia Penelope, 'Passing lesbians: the high cost of femininity', in L. Mohin (ed.), *An Intimacy of Equals: Lesbian Feminist Ethics* (London: Onlywomen Press, 1996), pp. 118–52. For all these writers, while masculinity is certainly not vindicated, femininity is targeted as a particularly personal affront. I am wary in writing this part of the essay of perpetuating what I perceive as an oversimplification of what often gets termed '1970s radical/separatist feminism'. The image conjured up by this gloss is, first, of a progressive narrative whereby radical feminism is displaced by cultural feminism, which is displaced by sex radical/postmodern feminism. This is clearly untrue, since the Mohin collection and other radical feminist anthologies are contemporary publications. Second, there is a widespread tendency to 'blame' radical feminists for highjacking lesbianism, and forcing butch/femme underground singlehandedly. It seems highly unlikely that radical feminists really had that much power, or that this can have been the primary factor involved in political and personal moves towards 'androgyny'. The tensions embedded in butch/femme relationships and lives themselves, for example, must also be contributory factors. Amber Hollibaugh and Cherríe Moraga discuss openly and beautifully the difficulties of negotiating masculinity and femininity differently (i.e. in non-oppressive ways) within butch/femme communities and identities (though it does seem to me that feminism is scapegoated in rather universalized ways at times too – 'It seems feminism is the last rock of conservatism' p. 252); Amber Hollibaugh and Cherríe Moraga, 'What we're rollin' around in bed with: sexual silences in feminism' (1981), in J. Nestle (ed.), *A Persistent Desire*, pp. 243–53. It would certainly be a shame if femme and butch identities were only to gain validity in opposition to a projected notion of feminist history. See *Radically Speaking*, one of a number of recent radical feminist volumes that highlights different attempts to rewrite radical feminist history; Diane Bell and Renate Klein (eds), *Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed* (Melbourne: Sinifex Press, 1996).
 21. Minnie Bruce Pratt, *S/HE* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1995), p. 19.
 22. Julia Penelope, 'Passing lesbians: the high cost of femininity', pp. 118–52. Penelope also argues that femininity oppresses working-class, fat lesbians. This is in direct contradiction to the narratives of her more accurate contemporaries, femme theorists Joan Nestle, Madeleine D. Davis and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, who have researched the importance of femme/butch identities in the establishment of working-class lesbian communities; Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1987); Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993). Clearly, not all femmes and butches are working-class, as Sheila Jeffreys points out – Sheila Jeffreys, 'Butch and femme: now and then', pp. 158–87 – but to claim, as Penelope does, that lesbian femininity only ever denotes class privilege as well as bisexuality is fundamentally inaccurate. I take altogether different approach to femmes and butches taken by Betty Rose Dudley in her 'in-your-face' column ('A fat, vulgar, angry slut', *Anything That Moves* Magazine for the Card-Carrying Bisexual, Issue 1, 1996 (Summer 1996), p. 14), where she rages against middle-class girls 'doing' butch and femme as "stud" and "slut", when 'they expect a privilege that no slut or stud that I grew up with ever envisioned'.
 23. Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, *Lesbian/Woman*, p. 67.
 24. See Nestle, 'The femme question', pp. 138–46; Hollibaugh and Moraga, 'What we're rollin' around in bed with', pp. 243–53; Madeline Davis, Amber Hollibaugh and Joan Nestle, 'The femme tapes', in J. Nestle, *The Persistent Desire*, pp. 254–67; Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*; Minnie Bruce Pratt, *S/HE*. This is, of course, not an exhaustive list.
 25. In Amber Hollibaugh and Cherríe Moraga, 'What we're rollin' around in bed with', p. 249. As Frann Michel argues, 'the visual indistinguishability of the femme from the straight or bisexual woman is frequently resolved through narrative, one version of which collapses bisexuality into a wayward heterosexuality'; Frann Michel, 'Do bats eat cats?', pp. 55–69.
 26. Teresa de Lauretis, 'Sexual indifference and lesbian representation'; Judith Roof, *A Lure of Knowledge: Lesbian Sexuality and Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993). All three theorists draw on (whether explicitly or not) the work of Sue-Ellen Case, in 'Toward a butch-femme aesthetic', *Discourse*, 11 (Winter

- 1988–1989), pp. 55–73, which argues that butch/femme (seen by Case as an indivisible unit) necessarily provides a critique and parody of heterosexual gender roles. Case in turn draws on the work of Joan Riviere, as does Butler, to argue for the radical positioning of butch/femme; Joan Riviere, 'Womanliness as masquerade', in V. Burgin, J. Donald and C. Kaplan (eds), *Formations of Fantasy* (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 35–44.
27. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 31.
 28. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, pp. 85–8, 234ff. Butler addresses more explicitly the question and performance of drag in *Bodies That Matter*, or of the 'masculine woman', though I think her notion of repudiation in *Bodies That Matter* can be extended to a discussion of the femme and of butch/femme.
 29. In itself, this is hardly a new insight, of course. Lisa Walker makes the same point when she says that 'the femme is invisible as a lesbian unless she is playing to a butch'; Lisa Walker, 'How to recognize a lesbian', p. 881.
 30. Carole-Anne Tyler, 'Passing: narcissism, identity, and difference', *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 6 (2&3) (1994), p. 235.
 31. As suggested by Carole-Anne Tyler's formulation of the penis as '(n)ot the phallus'; *ibid.*, pp. 241–3.
 32. Pat Califia, 'Diagnostic tests', in J. Nestle (ed.), *The Persistent Desire*, p. 484.
 33. Pat Califia, 'The Femme Poem', in J. Nestle (ed.), *The Persistent Desire*, p. 417.
 34. Carole-Anne Tyler, 'Passing', pp. 241–3.
 35. Pat Califia, 'The Femme Poem', pp. 416–17.
 36. That the shadow of straightness is not a structuring trope for butches can be seen in the upfront clear acknowledgement of butch desire for a man: 'You can tell she's butch / Because she's one of the boys / (And fucks one of them occasionally / To prove it)' (Califia, 'Diagnostic tests', p. 485). Here the butch is 'saved' from the spectre of straightness through her ability to identify with (as well as a way of desiring) 'the boys', and through the tone of irony that marks this representation of butch desire for men, a tone that is absent from her femme representations.
 37. Julia Creet, 'Anxieties of identity: coming out and coming undone', in M. Dorenkamp and R. Henke (eds), *Negotiating Lesbian and Gay Subjects* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995).
 38. Julia Creet, 'Anxieties of identity', p. 186. Creet's own rather shy hints at a bisexuality that threatens to undo her own lesbian identity resonate throughout her text.
 39. Lani Ka'ahumanu and Loraine Hutchins define 'bisexual' as 'people who have erotic, affectionate, romantic feelings for, fantasies of, and experiences with women and men, and/or who self-identify as bisexual'; Lani Ka'ahumanu and Loraine Hutchins (eds), *Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out* (Boston: Alyson, 1991), p. 369.
 40. Joan Nestle, in Joan Nestle and John Preston, 'Introduction', J. Nestle and J. Preston (eds), *Sister and Brother: Lesbians and Gay Men Write about Their Lives Together* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), p. 7. Most of the articles in this collection touch on the desire as well as the friendship between gay men and lesbians. What is often written as 'queer appreciation', as the exception to same-sex desire that proves the rule, could also be written as cultural repudiation of straightness that does not have to marginalize that desire as accidental and marginal (which is not the same as saying that these writers are all bisexual).
 41. John Preston, in Joan Nestle and John Preston, *Sister and Brother*, p. 10.
 42. *Ibid.*
 43. Thanks to Merl Storr for pointing this aspect of Nestle's and Preston's slippage to me.
 44. Preston and Nestle, *Sister and Brother*, p. 10.
 45. Pat Califia, 'Gay men, lesbians, and sex: doing it together', *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1994), p. 185. It is important to note that Califia acknowledges that biphobia may also be one reason preventing lesbians or gay men identifying as bisexual. In a different context I might also want to elaborate on the fact that self-identified bisexuals are actually *not* necessarily saying that men and women figure equally for them. In fact, it is common for bisexuals to desire men and women to different degrees. However, in 1983 (when this article was first published) there was little writing on bisexual desire that was not psychology- or sexology-based, and Califia's piece was one of the first to defend the right of bisexual women to be a part of lesbian subculture.
 46. Califia, 'Gay men, lesbians, and sex', p. 186.
 47. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
 48. *Ibid.*, p. 186.
 49. Debra Bercovitz, 'Stand by your man', in L. Newman (ed.), *The Femme Mystique* (Boston: Alyson, 1995), pp. 90, 93.
 50. *Ibid.*, pp. 93–4.
 51. Clearly there is a certain irony in the last sentence of Bercovitz's words. That irony does not change the fact that, throughout her article, Bercovitz gives voice to her deep concern with being 'read' correctly as lesbian femme. As I highlighted with both Califia and Butler, parody in itself does not release butch/femme from relationship to straightness.
 52. Brandon Teena was a young transsexual man living in Nebraska, who was killed by two men who had discovered that his gender identity and sexed body did not match. The police were responsible for both broadcasting his sexed identity (in a small town where he was widely known) and not taking his earlier rape by the same men seriously; see Minnie Bruce Pratt, *S/HE*, p. 173; and Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), p. 132.
 53. Pratt, *S/HE*, p. 174.
 54. *Ibid.*, pp. 179–85. So that entry is not something that should have to be 'earned' (again, by stripping) – 'the rumour was that the transsexual woman could have stayed last year, if she'd been willing to strip. The femme didn't want her butch to have to go through that' (p. 181).
 55. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
 56. Butches have commonly been read as both men and women. The difference in Pratt's story is that her lover

has the option of 'transitioning' to become male as well as identifying as transgendered.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
58. *Ibid.*, pp. 184–5.
59. Marcy Sheiner, 'What?', *Anything That Moves: The Magazine for the Bisexual-at-Large*, Issue No. 10 (Winter 1996), pp. 19–21.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
61. This may be partly what is implied by Sheiner's use of the term 'he-who-had-been-she'; *ibid.*, p. 20.
62. So far, it would seem that a bisexual femme subjectivity differs from a lesbian femme subjectivity only insofar as a bisexual femme's opposite-sex object-choices are not inconsistent with non-heterosexuality. This would appear to repeat the same gesture of repudiation formed ultimately through object-choice, since clearly lesbian femmes also make (and are made through) heterosexual cultural repudiations.
63. Which point is similar to the one made by bisexual theorist Michael du Plessis, who uses the term 'para-naming' to provide a way in which one can assert oneself 'totally bisexual' through negation ('not gay, not straight, but totally bisexual' as the slogan goes); Michael du Plessis, 'Blatantly bisexual: or, unthinking queer theory', in D. Hall and M. Pramaggiore (eds), *RePresenting Bisexualities*, p. 22. Such a construction of self through what one is not is, of course, also drawn from Monique Wittig, who argues that lesbians are not women; Monique Wittig, 'One is not born a woman', *Feminist Issues*, 1 (1) (Summer 1980). The emphasis in this article on repudiation of straight culture is really a personal one. I see myself as residing very much within 'queer' culture. It is not my intention to create a hierarchy of good (repudiating straight culture) and bad (repudiating lesbian culture) bisexual femmes, though.
64. Clare Hemmings, 'Bisexual theoretical perspectives: emergent and contingent relationships', in Bi Academic Intervention (ed.), *The Bisexual Imaginary*.
65. See Mariam Fraser, 'Lose your face', in Bi Academic Intervention (ed.), *The Bisexual Imaginary*, pp. 38–57. Fraser discusses Claudia Card's and Marilyn Frye's use of the term 'inauthentic lesbian' to describe 'bisexual' women.
66. Thanks to Merl Storr for pointing out the implications of my discussion of cultural repudiation and for providing me with the language to express my knotted thoughts in, even though she may still disagree with my conclusions.
67. Though, of course, that makes it sound far too easy and cleanly delineated than it really is! As Jo Eadie pointed out when reading an earlier draft of this paper, cultural repudiation may really be a cover for unwanted connection, and linked to bisexual guilt about opposite-sex/same-sex attractions.

Femme Erotic Independence

Notes

1. Cheryl Clarke, 'Of Althea and Flaxie', from *Narratives – Poems in the Tradition of Black Women* (New Brunswick, NJ: Sister Books, 1982), pp. 15–16.

2. Joan Nestle, 'Butch-fem relationships: sexual courage in the 1950s', *A Restricted Country* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1987), p. 108.
3. Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 184.
4. Audre Lorde, 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house', *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1984), p. 110.
5. Audre Lorde, 'Uses of the erotic: the erotic as power', *Sister Outsider*, p. 53.

Girl Talk

Notes

Many thanks to all the femmes who took part in the discussions and everyone who helped us with this chapter.

1. Joan Nestle (ed.), *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992); Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
2. Both dir. Emma Hindley, Polari Productions (*Butch-Femme*, 1995; *Storm in a Teacup*, 1993).
3. Sheila Jeffreys, *The Lesbian Heresy* (London: The Women's Press, 1994).
4. See Sue O'Sullivan, 'Girls who kiss girls and who cares?' in Diane Hamer and Belinda Budge (eds), *The Good, the Bad and the Gorgeous: Popular Culture's Romance with Lesbianism*, (London: Pandora, 1994).
5. Amy Lamé quoted in *Diva* magazine, February/March 1996.
6. For examples see L. Newman (ed.), *The Femme Mystique* (Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 1995).
7. Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country: Documents of Desire and Resistance* (New York: Firebrand Books, 1987).
8. For examples see Newman, *The Femme Mystique*.
9. For an interesting investigation of this point read Suzanne Patterson and Anne-Marie Le Bie's essay, 'Move over darling: beyond the daddy dyke', in Mark Simpson (ed.), *Anti-Gay* (London: Freedom Editions, 1996). We take issue, however, with their portrayal of butches as essentially anti-femme.

Embodying Desire

Notes

With thanks to Janet Harvie, Heather Barry, Tzarina Prater, Joe Breggia, Catherine Hennessy, Sally Munt, and Crow, Edie and Megan.

1. In 'The meaning of the phallus', Lacan argues that 'the phallus is the privileged signifier of that mark where the share of the logos is wedded to the advent of desire.

- One might say that this signifier is chosen as what stands out as most easily seized upon in the real of sexual copulation' (Lacan, 1982, p. 82).
2. I take the term 'neo-femme' from Lillian Faderman's article 'The return of butch and femme: a phenomenon in lesbian sexuality of the 1980s and 1990s', in which she says that 'neo-butche/femme may be seen . . . as a reaction against the sexual conformity that lesbian-feminism ironically mandated in the course of a radical era' (Faderman, 1992, p. 579). While I would not argue, as Faderman does, that 'butch and femme today can mean whatever one wants those terms to mean' (*ibid.*, p. 594), her distinction between historical time periods is useful.
 3. See, for example, Faderman's 'The return of butch and femme' (1992) and Suzanna Danuta Walters's 'From here to queer' (1996). While Walters raises crucial and complex questions about the relationship between queer theory and lesbian feminism, her discussion of butch/femme reduces these identities to 'sexual hobbies' (Walters, 1996, p. 859). Sherrie Inness and Michele Lloyd (1995), Kate Weston (1993), and Tracy Morgan (1993) all take issue with the lack of seriousness attached to butch and femme, arguing that some women experience butch and femme as identities that are embodied rather than 'put on' (and off) at will.
 4. The term 'non-mainstream body modification' seems to originate in anthropological and ethnographic research. See Susan Holtham's website 'Body piercing in the West' for a bibliography of this literature. It is evident that what constitutes mainstream and non-mainstream body modification is relative to what practices are considered customary within a given culture. But for the purposes of this essay, I retain the vocabulary with the understanding that, unless otherwise indicated, I refer to Western practices of body modification, and the understanding that the notion of the 'mainstream' benefits from deconstruction.
 5. Regarding distinctions within the category femme, I have heard the terms 'high-femme', 'art-femme' and 'punk-femme'. I identify as high-femme on the basis of how I play my femininity 'straight', and on the basis of Janet's suggestion that the difference between high-femmes and art-femmes can be measured in terms of the urgency to reapply lipstick – I am never without at least two shades.
 6. With reference to the issue of whether or not any identity can be regarded as innate, Morgan argues that 'some of us feel so pushed to the wall by those who question our right to butch and femme identities that the temptation to raise the flag of biology is not easily resisted' (Morgan, 1991, p. 43).
 7. See Jeff Goldthorpe's 'Intoxicated culture: punk symbolism and punk protest' (1992) for an analysis of how punk style has informed queer style through radical protest movements such as Queer Nation.
 8. The footage of Acker in *Stigmata* appears to be taken from an interview with Andrea Juno that is transcribed in *Angry Women* (Acker, 1991).
 9. See Karen Aubrey's 'Body piercing: gender nihilism in the 90s' (1995) for a popularized version of medical models that define non-mainstream body modification as pathological.
 10. Corseting, associated with the ostensible sexual repression of the Victorian era, ironically served to enhance the female figure by emphasizing the breasts and buttocks. Feminists commonly refer to corseting as an example of how traditional female body modification results in deformation, in this case by collapsing the rib-cage and compressing vital organs.
 11. While I have not yet given piercing in the S/M community the attention it merits, it seems clear that nipple piercings signify differently there. As part of the S/M aesthetic, many butches sport nipple piercings with leather harnesses that criss-cross the upper body in such a way as to leave the breasts bare.

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why can't a woman be more like a fag?' *Signs*, 21 (4), pp. 830–69.

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Losing Sue

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Untouchability and Vulnerability

Notes

- Lee Lynch, 'Stone butch', in Joan Nestle (ed.), *The Persistent Desire: A Femme–Butch Reader* (Boston: Alyson Press, 1992), p. 405.
- Ibid.*, p. 405.
- See Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993).
- See Judith Halberstam, 'Lesbian masculinity or even stone butches get the blues', *Women and Performance* 8 (2) (1996), pp. 61–73. Halberstam's analysis has been extremely useful to my own, particularly in the productive discrepancy between her assumption that butchness constitutes a form of female masculinity and my assumption that butches exhibit behaviour that might easily be coded as feminine.
- Lynch, 'Stone butch', p. 405.
- Bonni Barringer, 'When butches cry', in Nestle, *The Persistent Desire*, p. 109.
- For more on femme receptivity, see my essay 'Recasting receptivity: femme sexualities', in Karla Jay (ed.), *Lesbian Erotics* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 125–46.
- Mykel Johnson, 'Butchy femme', in Nestle, *The Persistent Desire*, p. 396.
- Sally Munt's 'The butch body' questions the valorization of vulnerability as a sign of intimacy. The demand for vulnerability gives rise to the negative assessment of butch untouchability and stimulates the questionable desire to 'break' butch impermeability. In *Heroic Desire: Lesbian Identity and Cultural Space* (London: Cassell/New York: New York University Press, 1997).
- Johnson, 'Butchy femme', p. 396.
- Cherríe Moraga, *Loving in the War Years: Lo que nunca pasos por sus labios* (Boston: South End Press, 1983), p. 125.
- In *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), Teresa De Lauretis develops an account of butch untouchability through the language of psychoanalysis, arguing that fetishism is more appropriate than castration to describe the productive possibilities of loss and absence that structure (butch) lesbian sexuality. In a reading of Moraga's *Giving up the Ghost*, she discusses how the butch lesbian Corky seeks impermeability and untouchability as a means of acknowledging and disavowing castration and thus turns her untouchable body into a fetish.
- Amber Hollibaugh and Cherríe Moraga, 'What we're rolling around in bed with', in Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson (eds), *Powers of Desire* (Boston: South End Press, 1983), p. 245.
- Ibid.*, p. 249.
- In 'Sexualities without genders and other queer utopias', in *Femininity Played Straight: The Significance of Being Lesbian* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), Biddy Martin discusses Moraga's construction of femininity in terms of vulnerability and confinement to the body, and she argues that queer valorizations of butch cross-gender identification as escape from the female body lead to the invisibility of femme lesbianism. Especially important is her discussion of the implications of this construction of femininity and the body for readings of Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick.
- Judith Butler describes this as the 'morphological imaginary', in *Bodies That Matter* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993). Her analysis, though, focuses primarily on the materialization of the phallus in the penis; Moraga's work suggests the range and scope of a specifically butch morphological imaginary, which foregrounds the symbolic significance of the body's surfaces or boundaries. Furthermore, her images emphasize the materiality of the discursive, which interests Butler but is ultimately given less attention than the discursivity of the material. The influence of Catholicism on Moraga's interest in the materializations

- of the immaterial (or spiritual) is not to be underestimated. For more on the lesbian erotics of surfaces, see Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), and *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995).
17. Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, pp. 120–1.
 18. See Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, 'De-constructing the lesbian body: Cherrie Moraga's *Loving in the War Years*', in Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale and David Halperin (eds), *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 595–603, for more on Moraga's discursive production of the body.
 19. I say this out of a sense (admittedly impressionistic) that *Stone Butch Blues* has been more compelling for many readers than *The Persistent Desire* and *Boots of Leather*. I am interested in how this reception elides the distinction between butch and transgender identities and substitutes a single exceptional narrative for a range of narratives.
 20. Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand, 1993), p. 5.
 21. In *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), Michael Warner describes how citizenship and the public sphere were centrally tied to the history of publication, understood as a means of addressing through writing an anonymous but collective public and, by so doing, constituting the writer as a public person.
 22. Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*, p. 150.
 23. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
 24. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
 25. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
 26. *Ibid.*, pp. 213–14.
 27. *Ibid.*, p. 217.
 28. *Ibid.*
 29. *Ibid.*, p. 275.
 30. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
 31. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
 32. *Ibid.*, p. 184. See, however, Anna Livia's wonderful essay on what she calls the 'butch grunt style', which consists of saying very little and being emotionally inexpressive. She suggests that this style is not reflected by the empirical evidence that men generally talk more than women, and argues that the butch idiom of white working-class masculinity is a fictional model borrowed from sources such as Hollywood and hard-boiled detective fiction. 'I ought to throw a brick at you': fictional representations of butch/femme speech', in Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall (eds), *Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 245–77.
 33. Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*, p. 185.
 34. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
 35. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
 36. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
 37. *Ibid.*
 38. *Ibid.*
 39. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
 40. My thinking here is influenced by Toni Morrison's essay 'Unspeakable things unspoken: the Afro-American presence in American literature', *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 28 (1) (1989), pp. 1–34, and her novel *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987). See also my article 'Sexual trauma/queer memory: incest, lesbianism, and therapeutic culture', *GLQ*, 2 (4) (1995), pp. 351–77, on the articulation of incest and trauma within lesbian culture.
 41. Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*, p. 12.
 42. See Judith Halberstam, 'F2M: the making of female masculinity', in Laura Doan (ed.), *The Lesbian Postmodern* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 210–28, and *Female Masculinity* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming 1998).
 43. See Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), especially pp. 82–90, and especially the claim that it is neither desirable nor possible to decide whether a minoritizing or universalizing strategy is preferable without reference to specific contexts.
 44. In *Femininity Played Straight: The Significance of Being Lesbian* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), Biddy Martin argues that the category of interiority is evacuated too quickly by recent queer theory.
 45. I am referring in particular to Judith Butler's use of the examples of drag and butch/femme in *Gender Trouble* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), as well as to the relation between the material or concrete example and abstract theory in *Bodies That Matter*. But my concerns apply more generally to the use of butch/femme to exemplify theoretical and methodological claims, as in Sue-Ellen Case's influential essay 'Toward a butch-femme aesthetic', *Discourse*, 11 (1) (Fall 1988/Winter 1989), pp. 55–73.
 46. 'This providing butch who seems at first to replicate a certain husband-like role, can find herself caught in a logic of inversion whereby that "providingness" turns to self-sacrifice, which implicates her in the most ancient trap of feminine self-abnegation.' Judith Butler, 'Imitation and gender insubordination', in Diana Fuss (ed.), *Inside/Out* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), p. 25. The butch inverts into a femme only if it is impossible for butches to display feminine behaviour and remain butch.

'Real' Compared to What?

Notes

The title is a playful reference to the jazz song 'Compared to What' that features the refrain 'trying to get real, compared to what'; written by Gene McDaniels, performed by Les McCann and Eddie Harris and recorded live at the Montreux Jazz Festival, 1969. It can be found in the *Blues 'N' Jazz* album, Atlantic, 1973, WEA.

1. In everyday Greek and school texts we have always referred to that period as *sklavia*, i.e. slavery. But given

- the complex and still-contested definition of slavery I use the word subjugation.
2. *Greek Love and Sapphic Sophistication* was screened on Channel 4, on 24 April 1990. It was produced by Fulcrum Production Company and was directed by Konstantinos Giannaris.
 3. The article was published in Issue No. 3, August 1994, pp. 24–6. *Diva* is published by Millivres Ltd.
 4. Dykes interviewed at the offices of the Greek Homosexual Community, summer 1996.
 5. *Diva*, *ibid*.
 6. I interviewed Bellou in January 1990, but she did not appear in the documentary.
 7. Serving in the Army is compulsory for all males above eighteen and it is usually for two years. There is a very strong popular mythology around 'the soldier' in Greece. The 'soldier' is also an important part of gay iconography, especially in the work of artist Yannis Tsarouhis.
 8. *Greek Love and Sapphic Sophistication*.
 9. As stated in *AMFI*, the longest-running gay magazine, Volume D, Issue 2, June–July 1996, p. 4. *AMFI* can be contacted at P.O. Box 4165, Athens 10210, Greece, or via email: <ulman@hol.gr>.
 10. H. B. was interviewed in winter 1990.
 11. Katerina, twenty-three years old, was interviewed at the offices of the Greek Homosexual Community, summer 1996.
 12. *Madam Gu*, Issue 3, June 1996, p. 24. For copies of the magazine, write to *Madam Gu*, P.O. Box 31162, Athens 10035.
 13. Helen Tsaklari is also involved in the editorial group of *AMFI*.
- lesbian sexuality through erasure: the case of Jennifer Saunders', in Jodi Dean (ed.), *Resisting the Political: Feminism and the New Democracy* (London: Sage Press, 1997).
6. *Regina v. Jennifer Lynne Saunders*, in the Crown Court at Doncaster, before His Honour Judge Crabtree; Mr P. Kelson, for the Prosecution; Mr M. Robertshaw, for the Defence; 18–20 September 1991.
 7. Lesbian sexual practices have generally been ignored in British law. There is no reference to lesbian sex in Henry VIII's 1533 law on sodomy, the 1861 and 1885 laws on sodomy and gross indecency, the 1898 Vagrancy Act that dealt with female prostitution and male homosexuality, the 1967 Sexual Offences Act that decriminalized a narrowly defined set of male homosexual practices, or Section 25 of the 1991 Criminal Justice Act that increased the severity of sentences for 'public' sexual offences. In the parliamentary debates on Section 28 of the 1987–8 Local Government Act that prohibited the promotion of homosexuality by local governments, gay male sexuality was, for the most part, singled out for demonization. These absences do not reflect some particularly benevolent attitude towards lesbians; on the contrary, they are the products of the deeply misogynist idea that male desire exhausts the meaning of sexual practice.
 8. Anna Marie Smith, 'The regulation of lesbian sexuality through erasure', in Karla Jay (ed.), *Lesbian Erotics*, p. 165.
 9. Norma Alarcón, 'The theoretical subject(s) of *This Bridge Called My Back*, and Anglo-American feminism', in Gloria Anzaldúa (ed.), *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation Books, 1990), pp. 361–2.

Regina v. Saunders

Notes

1. I would like to thank the Humanities Council of Cornell University for providing a generous grant that allowed me to purchase a copy of the transcript of the case. I am currently assembling an edited version of the transcripts and related documents for publication. I would also like to note that I have used pseudonyms for the complainants in this case, as the transcripts contain a great deal of personal information about them. I also believe that we cannot hold them fully accountable for their decision to testify against Saunders because of their age at the time. I regret that the publicity surrounding the case is such that the use of a pseudonym for the accused would serve no purpose.
2. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
3. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 27–56.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
5. Anna Marie Smith, 'The regulation of lesbian sexuality through erasure: the case of Jennifer Saunders', in Karla Jay (ed.), *Lesbian Erotics* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 164–82; and 'The regulation of

Public Disclosure and the Closeting of Butch Lesbians

Notes

I would like to thank Cheryl Hall, Judith Garber and Kathy Ferguson for their helpful comments on this article, and the Office of Women's Research at the University of Hawaii for the opportunity to present these ideas in a seminar.

1. See, for example, Andrew Sullivan, *Virtually Normal* (New York: Knopf, 1995).
2. There is a growing literature on butch identities and masculine women. See, for example, Lily Burana, Roxie and Linnea Due (eds), *Dagger: On Butch Women* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1994); Sherrie Inness and Michele E. Lloyd, 'G.I. Joes in Barbie land: recontextualizing butch in twentieth-century lesbian culture', in Brett Beemyn and Mickey Eliason (eds), *Queer Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), pp. 7–34; Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge,

- 1993); JoAnn Loulan, *The Lesbian Erotic Dance: Butch, Femme, Androgyny, and Other Rhythms* (San Francisco: Spinsters, 1990); Tracy Morgan, 'Butch-femme and the politics of identity', in Arlene Stein (ed.), *Sisters, Sexperts, Queers: Beyond the Lesbian Nation* (New York: Plume, 1993); Joan Nestle (ed.), *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* (Boston: Alyson, 1992); Esther Newton, 'The mythic mannish lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the new woman', *Signs*, 9 (4) (1984), pp. 557-75; Martha Vicinus, '"They wonder to which sex I belong": The historical roots of the modern lesbian identity', *Feminist Studies*, 18 (3) (Fall 1992), pp. 467-97.
3. See Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman, 'Have we got a theory for you! Feminist theory, cultural imperialism and the demand for "the woman's voice"', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 6 (1983), pp. 573-81.
 4. Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, p. 152.
 5. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
 6. For the contrast between social acceptance of women-loving women and gender-transgressing women, see Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
 7. Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, p. 137.
 8. Kay Tobin, 'Picketing: the impact and the issues', *The Ladder*, 9 (12) (September 1965), p. 4.
 9. The names and the missions of the two largest United States organizations reflect their origins. The NGLTF, originally the National Gay Task Force, was formed in 1974. As a product of gay liberation activism, NGLTF has embraced a combination of interest-group advocacy with broader social analysis and agenda formation. The HRC, formed in the Reagan years, has always had a more assimilationist interest-group tone. The use of 'human rights' rather than a more queer-identified name serves to provide anonymity for donors and recipients of funds, as well as to link queer causes to the theme of human rights. In this it is reminiscent of earlier organizations such as the Chicago-based Society for Human Rights, founded in 1924, and the Society for Individual Rights, a 1950s-1960s group based in San Francisco.
 10. Joan Nestle, 'The fem question', in Nestle (ed.), *The Persistent Desire*, p. 143.
 11. Teresa de Lauretis, 'Queer theory: lesbian and gay sexualities, an introduction', *differences*, 3 (2) (1991), p. iii.
 12. Candace Gingrich, sister of Newt Gingrich (Speaker of the US House of Representatives since 1995), has been recruited as a spokesperson because of the embarrassment she offers her brother. She is the most visibly butch of the HRC celebrities, and the most clearly working-class. I suspect that without her famous relation, the HRC leadership would no more talk to Candace Gingrich than they would dance naked in a Gay Pride Parade.
 13. In a different context, Annamarie Jagose refers to 'straightened' presentations of lesbianism as the 'transparent closet'. In this closet, one is visibly lesbian, yet the terms of one's self-description are resolutely heterosexual. Although this is not the place for an extended discussion, I refer the reader to Jagose's discussion in chapter 4 of *Lesbian Utopics* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
 14. Joshua Gamson, 'Must identity movements self-destruct?', in Steven Seidman (ed.), *Queer Theory/Sociology* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), p. 402. Gamson argues that this assimilationist logic is behind the phrase 'we are everywhere'. Although I agree that the notion of ubiquity can be used in this logic, I don't agree that it must be or that it always has been. Instead, I would offer 'we are everywhere' as simultaneously claiming membership and subverting the social by pointing to the gaps in the heterosexual social fabric. Thus, 'we are everywhere' may operate in both an assimilationist and a queer logic. See Mark Blasius and Shane Phelan (eds), *We Are Everywhere: An Historical Sourcebook in Lesbian and Gay Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
 15. Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), chapter 5.
 16. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
 17. *Ibid.*
 18. See, for example, Anna Marie Smith, 'The "good" homosexual and the "assimilable immigrant"', in Shane Phelan (ed.), *Playing with Fire: Queer Politics, Queer Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1996).
 19. Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen, *After the Ball: How America Will Conquer Its Fear and Hatred of Gays in the 1990s* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989).
 20. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 140. The caution of the gay-rights advocates is not, however, only strategic. Most of our 'leaders' are as committed to respectability as are their opponents.
 21. Biddy Martin, 'Sexualities without genders and other queer utopias', *diacritics*, 24 (2-3) (1994), pp. 104-21.
 22. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1989) and 'Critically queer', *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
 23. This is not meant to overlook the racism and sexism that still exist within NGLTF. Vaid has written about the racism of many NGLTF board members and supporters. Although the mainstream gay press does not link NGLTF's relative decline to racism, I believe that such a link exists and could be documented. The more 'respectable' organizations are also much more overwhelmingly white. See Urvashi Vaid, *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation* (New York: Schocken, 1996).
 24. Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*, pp. 82-3, 145.
 25. I am indebted to Joyce Chinen for this insight.

Orifices in Space

Notes

1. Cited in Lawrence Wright, *Clean and Decent: The History of the Bath and Loo and of Sundry Habits, Fashions, and Accessories of The Toilet principally in Great Britain*,

- France, and America (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 54.
2. *Ibid.*
 3. Jonathan Swift, 'The Lady's Dressing Room' (1730), lines 89–94.
 4. I have a suspicion that butch and femme readings of this particular poem would similarly polarize.
 5. I am paraphrasing from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 85.
 6. Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 28.
 7. Reference in the original to Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 137.
 8. Bersani, *Homos*, pp. 46–7.
 9. J. Lacan, 'The agency of the letter in the unconscious or reason since Freud', in *Écrits* (New York: Norton, 1977), pp. 146–78, 151.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
 11. *Ibid.*
 12. Catherine Clément, 'Love's pleasures', in *The Lives and Legends of Jacques Lacan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 41.
 13. Edwin Chadwick, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1842), p. 411.
 14. *Ibid.*, pp. 412–13.
 15. *Ibid.*, p. 415.
 16. See Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*.
 17. D. A. Miller, 'Anal Rope', in Diana Fuss, *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 119–41, 130.
 18. The idea of the perverse dynamic is taken from Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).
 19. D. A. Miller, 'Anal Rope', p. 131.
 20. Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country* (London: Sheba Feminist Press, 1988), pp. 37–9.
 21. Sara Delamont, 'The nun in the toilet: urban legends and educational research', *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 2 (3) (1989), pp. 191–202.
 22. Dorothy Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina* (London: Flamingo Books/HarperCollins, 1993); Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1993).
 23. Mary Gaitskill, *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991), pp. 107–8.
 24. Lynda Hart, 'Karen Finley's dirty work: censorship, homophobia, and the NEA', *Genders*, 14 (Fall), pp. 1–15.
 25. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
 26. Sigmund Freud, 'The most prevalent form of degradation in erotic life', in Philip Rieff (ed.), *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), pp. 58–70, 66–7.
 27. *Ibid.*, pp. 68–9.

Living under the Sign of the Cross

Notes

1. On the contrary, I argue that 'shame' and 'discipline' are highly erotic in my book, *Between the Body and the Flesh: Performing Sadomasochism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).
2. I don't mean that one doesn't see/hear the order of this coupling reversed. In fact, Joan Nestle's anthology very pointedly makes that reversal: *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992). Nonetheless, this linguistic reversal does not obviate my point about the absence of the phrasing 'femme in the streets, butch in the sheets'.

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butch/femme

INSIDE LESBIAN GENDER

Editor: Sally R. Munt

with an Afterword by Judith Butler, photo editor: Cherry Smyth

Is butch/femme the way she smokes a cigarette, shapes her mouth, wears her Levi's, takes you into her body, or touches her breasts – or not, bites her hot dog, builds her shoulders, shops for clothing, is silent or talks? Is it in the poise of her hand? Is it in the kind of risks she takes? The way she presses you against a wall? The two most public lesbian genders are butch and femme. Whether as the singular categories butch and femme or as the 'co-dependent' entity butch/femme, these lesbian genders have facilitated lesbian sex, lesbian desire, for decades. Butch/femme knits together desire, turning and twisting its strands into social formations. It is lesbian gender experienced from the inside, it's a mode of articulation and a living movement, it's the way our bodies speak our desire, a way we can inhabit lesbian desire.

This book presents a collection of work by major British and North American academics, writers and artists who attempt to think creatively about butch/femme in a way that honours the intimacy of these designations. Combining traditional academic pieces with poetry, autobiography, fiction and photography, *butch/femme* is a moving, bold and creative examination of the discrete specificities and corporealities of queer desire.



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Photo by Del La Grace

Cherry Smyth is a critic and writer. Her essays, poetry and fiction have been widely anthologized and she is the author of *Damn Fine Art by New Lesbian Artists*.


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